BOOK 1

KARNA

1

I want to say something today Some will startle hearing my words And wonder *How can anyone swallowed by Death speak?* But a time comes when the dead have to speak too When the flesh-and-bones living behave like the dead, then the dead have to come alive and speak out Oh, I'm not going to say anything on behalf of others, because I know only too well I'm not so great a philosopher as to do anything like that The thing is the world was to me a battlefield And what was my role in the battlefield? That of a quiver full of arrows A quiver stuffed with all sizes and shapes of arrows, each with its own separate function Just a quiver—just that *one* kind of quiver

I am going to lay bare that quiver today and expose it to all present All its varied special shooting arrows—all the exactly alike ones—I am going to show them all, freely, of my own accord, with my own hands Some shining with celestial bands, some instantly alluring the eyes with their fierce, attractive shapes, some with pitiful shredded tails, and some looking weird with tattered bands—all these arrows—exactly as they are—I intend to put them on display for everyone today

I want to get them properly weighed on the scales of the world's heroism I want them evaluated by universal motherhood Each guru on earth must come forward and pinpoint for me the exact significance of each I want them examined by life-sacrificing friendship I want them assessed by closeness drenched in heart-warming filial fountains

From deep down—from somewhere in the deepest recesses of my heart—a voice keeps calling out to me The more I steel myself against it, the more it flares out, like a flame that a wind fans instead of extinguishing "Tell them all, Karna Tell them the story of your life Tell it to them openly so they ll understand, because that is the way nowadays The whole world says, 'Karna, your life was in tatters ' Go, tell them it wasn't tattered and torn, it was a rich gold-bordered royal silk garment Only—only it ripped into a thousand

shreds in the entanglements of circumstances Whoever came across these shreds, made whatever use of them they wanted Why then are you so enamoured of your royal garment?"

Show them all today, clearly and finally—your royal dress that got shredded in the furious doom-dance of Kala was in no way less precious than brand-new seamless rolls of lavish fabrics stacked away in a lovely chest Stuff it well in their ears! Will your story succeed in shaking listeners in this crazy world who are attracted to tales of heroes one minute and the very next discard the tales with facile indifference? Does it have that gripping power?

They will all want to hear your story today—those who have firm faith in the reality of this world, those who treat Death as a toy, those lion-chested heroes whose existence is very much felt in this earth Ah, but is this a story only? It is actually a mighty truth Truth is least affected by those who see it and hear it Truth appears always as itself whenever it appears, it rises like the Sun-God himself

Whatever the story, all listeners expect from it the sweet intoxication of wine, the rhythmic footbeats of dancers, and the passionate embraces of lovers They want a thrill that ecstatically transports them away from life's brevity In my life-story, which I'm going to narrate, there is no such winy headiness No lilting feet-tappings to titillate the mind Only conflict Conflict that convulses the imagination

I'm just an ordinary soldier who knows how to fight as best as he can I'm telling the story of my life for one reason only—to make sense of it for myself No man's mind feels light until he tells his whole story out That's why I'm speaking out today, freely

The real problem before me today is how to tell my story in a logical and connected way? Because all the events of my life seem to be scattering helter-skelter in my mind instead of marching sequentially, they disperse like herds of wild horses galloping crazily when ear-splitting flashes of lightning crash in a forest How shall I bring order in their ranks? I don't know why, but one picture comes now in front of my eyes Champanagari on the enchanting, sacred bank of the Ganga The village of Champanagari was a beautiful curve in the flow of my life—one of my sweetest memories

Thoughts of that small place, and various warblings and chirpings, fill the forest of my memories, and my experiences like

flocks of deer scamper excitedly in my mind I have heard some say memories are like peacock feathers, others compare them to *vakula* blossoms that fade but leave behind their fragrance I don't think so I think memories are like elephant's foot-prints They make a deep, indelible impression on our moist mind At least, that's the way my memories have been Champanagari is one such deep memory a clear, timeless stamp on my barren life of the massive lord-elephant of Time It is the most peaceful and desirable resting-place in the pilgrimage of my life Some describe life as a temple I know only too well that my life never even vaguely resembled a temple But if it *has to be compared to a temple, then Champa*-nagari is the sweetest-tinkling bell in that temple

A small village in one corner of the holy Ganga What kind of village?

2

Creeper-covered, bird-and-beast-haunted such was Champa-nagari, my little village cradled in the lap of the goddess of Nature I passed my happy childhood in that village where *chatakas, chakoras,* kokilas, śkylarks, *sarangas* and other song-birds woke me at dawn with their music, where every morning I performed my rituals and ablutions to the mooing of cows, where I rested under the thick shade of kadamba trees on incessantly sunny afternoons, where I returned home to the tinkling of bells on the necks of cows in the pious cowdust-hour of evening, where at night I slept quietly draping on my body the cool, soft breeze from the banks of the Ganga Yes, I spent my childhood here Then it sped away like a shot arrow, never to return

But I can instantly recall, if I so wish, the stretch of the Ganga touching the horizon What a vast kingdom of transparent-blue water! Each drop of that water knows me well, and I too know well each drop of that water This is the Ganga where soft wet sands received the imprint of my innocent boyish feet It is here that the mischievous gust of breeze flirted with my body's upper garment That is why, along with memories of Champa village, my boyhood memories of Ganga mata, spreading from one end to the other, also spring in front of my eyes What is childhood, after all? Who has the right answer? So many have given so many definitions, but if you ask me, I think it's like a chariot A chariot that's pulled by free and

far-ranging horses of the imagination The distant waves of the Ganga—are they really touching the blue sky somewhere far away? The chariot of the imagination races instantaneously to verify this Why don't the scintillating stuck stars fall and sink in the waters?—To verify this the chariot again leaps forward

3

I and my younger brother Shon Our own little world! Shon! Yes, Shon! His full name was Shatruntapa, but everyone called him Shon I had another brother, Vrikrata But when still a little boy he went over to his mother's sister in the kingdom of Vikata That left the two of us Shon and me My childhood world was filled with memories of the two of us It was a wonderful miniscule world—of two boys growing up with their dreams in the sweet ethos of Champa village No pretences, no falsities, no petty jealousies A selfless little world of two brothers Two guards stood at the entrance our mother Radha, and our father Adhiratha Even today, when I think of them, the soft strings of my heart vibrate melodiously, and spontaneously, out of gratitude and affection, two tear-drops form in my eyes But only for a fleeting instant Quickly I wipe them away I know that tears betray weakness No tears have ever succeeded in extinguishing the flames of grief Yet until I can feel those two tear-drops, I don't get a feeling of relief It's true that apart from those tears I could never give my parents anything significant or precious And yet, what else is there worth giving to one's parents as a token of love? I don't think of such things My father and mother had no expectations from me All I received from them was love So, loaded with gratitude and moist with affection, these two tears that form in my eyes for my parents .

4

My mother was an ocean of affection In my childhood the people of the village called me Vasusena To my little brother Shon I was Vasu bhaiya Every day, hundreds of times, my mother called me "Vasu! Vasu!" Not only the milk of her breasts, but what I received from her was the continuing pure nectar of her love As if she was born for only one purpose to love all equally Champanagari

knew her as Radha-mata Her word was law—because she was impossibly tolerant and brimmingly loving I was born with flesh-ear-rings—and she was always discussing it with the village folk And how upset she would get if I escaped her eyes for even a moment! How disconsolate! Rush to her neighbours to look for me Seat me in front of her and stare, without reason, for hours, at my ear-rings, till she almost became transfixed Run her hands lovingly on my head and whisper "Vasu, don't you ever go near the Ganga—not even by mistake "

"Why?" I would ask

"You must listen to your elders When you're told not to go, you don't go "

"You're such a coward, mother What's going to happen if I go?"

"No, Vasu " She would pull me towards her and, rippling her long fingers through my hair, ask, "Vasu, you love me or no?"

"Uh-huh " I'd shake my head

She'd look surprised at my nodding ear-rings "Then listen to me, and don't go near the Ganga," and she'd press me hard to her A strange fear seemed to be swimming in her eyes

I'd placate her by saying, "All right If you don't want me to go, I won't Satisfied?"

And then she'd hug me in a deep motherly embrace She'd start kissing non-stop my head and ears, one after the other And all I wanted then was to be in her embrace forever

Cuddled in her lap I'd think Why is mother so afraid of the Ganga? And I so loved Ganga-mata! How I longed to sit and talk to her countless lapping waves! I knew no greater pleasure Supposing mother were to find out? She would surely turn up near the Ganga during one of her rounds of searching for me Nevertheless, catch me giving up going to the Ganga! But naturally, I'd have to see that mother never got to know I'd make up my mind, and then go about gathering fistfuls of yellow *vakula* and *sopia* flowers to present to Shon, to bribe him into silence

5

My father was the chief of charioteers in the palace of Dhritarashtra king of the Kauravas He spent most of his time in

the faraway Kaurava capital Hastinapura Now and then he would drive down to Champanagari in a huge chariot What excitement for me and Shon! The instant it halted in front of our leaf-thatched home, Shon would leap inside the chariot, snatch the reins from father's hands, and shout, "Vasu-bhaiya, hurry! Let's go get shells from the Ganga " I would dash out, leaving behind my delicious food

Seated in father's chariot, we flew like the wind to the bank of the Ganga, beyond the town limits The five cream-coloured horses, tail-tufts upraised, ears erect, galloped swiftly Controlling them was a headache for young Shon Biting his lower lip hard, he tried in vain swerving them smoothly around corners, and in tired desperation he sought my help The reins left graze-marks on his hands His voice became so gentle then that I felt a powerful tug of affection for him I took the reins from his hands Reversing the whip, he used it to play with the horses' manes "Hah! Hah!" he yelled, urging them faster with the whip, till they obliged with spurts of speed Achieving his wish, he clapped his hands frantically as if to enthuse me too And then, before we even knew it, we had arrived at the bank of the Ganga, just a mile or two away In a flash, Shon sped like a deer to the riverside, imprinting his small footmarks in the wet sand I stayed where I was, as if my hands and feet had become numb, and I kept staring fixedly in the direction of the water It seemed to me, for no reason, that there was a bond between me and the water—an indissoluble bond And then came a second thought *Chhee ! What does water have to do with a man? It's only a temporary quencher of human thirst, that's all* The reins slipped from my hands, I did not know when I drank in the scene with my small eyes And it struck me then—How wonderful if I were to have eyes, and only eyes, all over my body !

Shon's questioning snapped me out of my reverie The discovery of so many vari-coloured shells made him walk as if on air He showered me with queries "Bhaiya, how are shells made? From water no?

"Yes '

But that didn't satisfy him Another query "You mean all these colours are made by water?"

Yes

Why don't we see these colours in the water then?"

I put off answering sometimes, because I knew he had a volley of additional questions to fire at me And, in any case, the truth

was that I didn't always have the answers

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"Come, we're very late " With these words I tried to divert his mind

By the time we got back, it was evening, and we would see flocks of eagles, kokilas, pigeons, quail, *patrarathas* and red sheldrakes clamorously returning to their nests Craning his neck out of the chariot-frame, Shon would look at the flying swarms and again shoot questions at me But I wasn't paying attention to him at that time The Sun-God was beginning his descent in the stately, lofty western mountains Even after their non-stop gallop all day long, his chariot's steeds had not tired The two massive hills appeared to me to be two door-guards of the palace of the sun Gazing at the flaming orb stirred a mysterious unease in my heart, I don't know why In a matter of seconds that glowing ball of fire would vanish from my line of vision—the very thought of the sun's absence sent inexplicable ripples flashing all over my body I stared intently at the red disc Shon would jerk me back to reality, and point to a cacophonous crowd of vultures speeding across the sky Briefly I would stare at those huge-bodied wild feathered creatures, soaring far above the other birds

Shon would ask, "What birds are these, bhaiya?"

' *Garudas* The king of birds "

"Bhaiya, will you rise as high as these *garudas* ?" he'd ask casually

"Silly! Am I a bird or what? How do you expect me to fly so high?"

"All right, you're not a bird! Tell me, how were you able to control those speeding horses? '

"Achcha bhai, I'll rise as high as the *garudas* So high you won't be able to see me Satisfied?" He seemed to be A tender, respectful look for me sparkled in his eyes

I gazed again at the western horizon, and ultimately I asked him, "See that sun-ball, Shon? Tell me how you feel about it "

It seemed to me that, after gazing briefly but intently at the sun, he would express feelings identical to mine But no sooner had he started staring sunward than his little baby eyes closed tight because of the glare, a little later, blinking, he said to me hurriedly, looking at my ears, "I think he looks like your face, Vasu bhaiya "

I touched my ears and felt the two lobes of my flesh-ear-rings. Word was I was born with them

Shon would start complaining, "How mother loves you! More than me Bhaiya, see that's why she's given you these ear-rings I have no flesh-ear-rings "

The way he expressed his innermost feelings made me pensive I gazed intently at the disappearing orb of the westward-setting sun A storm of feelings raced through my boy's mind Steadying the reins in one hand, avoiding Shon's gaze, I waved farewell to the vanishing sun with the other A funny kind of restlessness overpowered me, as if something close was slipping away from me, slipping far, far away On an impulse I lashed the whip on the horses' backs Their hooves kicked up dust as they galloped like the wind, neighing loudly Shon beside me, the galloping horses, the trees flashing past—*ashoka*, date-palm, *kimshuk*, mahua, trumpet-flower, black catechu, kadamba, sal, seven-leaf, and tall thick-leaved others—I wasn't aware of any of them Only the road fleeing backwards, its twists and turns—I noticed only these A thought flashed lightning-like *I am getting dragged, dragged backward like the road, from the realm of radiance into a dreadful welter of darkness* It seemed to me that all my twelve nocturnal hours would be spent in aloneness

Back in Parnakuti, our thatched-leaf-hut, Shon excitedly spread out and displayed his collection of multi-coloured shells before mother She praised him and asked me, "What about you, Vasu? What have you brought?" This flustered me, for the moment I had nothing to say The reason was I never did bring anything Cautiously I replied, "I have brought Shon home, mother Isn't that enough? Or he'd have sat on the bank and gathered shells all night "

Oh, is that so! *You* brought me? *I* brought *him*, that's what—or he d have stayed back there, waiting for the sun to return at dawn " Shon nodded his head while presenting his case Mother looked intently at me Why so intently, I could not make out I left the room and went outside

6

There were any number of different-shaped bows that father had

brought and placed in our simple abode. I don't know why, but the first time I laid eyes on a bow I felt strangely attracted to it—more than a strange, a *wonderful* fascination. The pigeon-necked curve of the shaft, the bow-string that twanged at the touch of a finger nail—these fascinated me. I had, you might say, appropriated the bow from father. I whirled it in my hands, and frisked off to the courtyard to meet Shon, flicking a horse's tail with it as I ran. He was busy removing the shiny long hairs from the tail. He was humming. I showed him the bow and said, "Shon, look at this toy of ours. Stop plucking horse-hairs, Shon. Now we have a new game to play."

He threw aside the hairs in his hand. "Show! Show!" he shouted and ran eagerly towards me. Taking the bow from my hands, he said, his eyes growing large, "Heavy, isn't it?"

"Don't be silly! *This*—heavy? Here, let me have it. And get me an arrow." I sent him on the errand.

Shouting "An arrow for bhaiya! An arrow for bhaiya!" he ran inside.

With my upper garment I carefully wiped the bow of dust. I balanced it in my hand, trying to guess its weight. Shon bounded in, carrying an arrow. He handed the arrow to me and, pointing to a massive banyan in front, he said, "Bhaiya, shoot at that tree."

I swiftly fitted the arrow and pulled the bowstring taut. Aiming straight, steadying my hand, I closed my left eye and released the arrow. Straight-flying like a hawk, the arrow sped smoothly to its target, and embedded itself in the trunk—*kchchch*! A milky sap trickled down the bark. Shon leapt up and down, clapping in joy. My aim delighted him no end.

From that day on this became a regular game for Shon and me. Making a bull's-eye target of a hawk circling high up in the sky, slicing off young mango shoots on branches swaying gently in the breeze, firing two arrows simultaneously and hitting two separate objects—we played these and many other games for hours on end. Our father was judge at all these sports. Whatever he decided, we accepted with bowed heads. But I had always one idea uppermost in my mind. I wanted to know the ins-and-outs of archery. Aiming at an invisible target by sound only, was a skill I desired specially to learn. Like a porcupine releasing hundreds of quills in self-defence, I wanted to learn how to shoot countless arrows simultaneously.

7

Who knows what dreams really signify? To me it seems they are wish-fulfilments of suppressed desires, for that night I dreamt of dancing bows Flower-decorated bows with curved designs, strong yet flexible bows—one by one I held them in my hands Whatever object I sighted became the target of my unwavering aim Delighted with the accuracy of my shooting, I clapped my own praise—and woke up, still clapping

One morning Shon and I went to the forest near the town to collect the tough and durable acacia wood used in the making of chariots Shon was in high spirits that day Nothing pleased him more than a chance to stroll in the forest The sweet varied warblings of the birds, the rustling of tree branches, the splashing of waterfalls, the susurrus of creepers twining round massive-bodied tree trunks—these fascinated Shon He could go on tirelessly describing them for hours I wasn't that keen about going into the forest, because not a glimmer of the Sun-God's rays penetrated there I would become inexplicably apprehensive, inexplicably suffocated, and try to leave as quickly as possible Only when I emerged into the open did I experience a small sense of relief The darshan of the Sun-God sufficed to instantly dispel my weariness

We returned that day, as was our practice, with the acacia wood I speeded up my gait in order to get out of the forest quickly Shon was following me I halted near a clearing He caught up with me Leaning his load of wood against a tree, he wiped the sweat off his face In front, in scattered clumps, grew reeds A herd of white cows and dark buffaloes was grazing in that reedy swamp A stag had got mixed up in that herd He stared in our direction with his elegant antlers held high This was good enough reason for Shon to fire a question Instantly he asked me, "Bhaiya, how did this stag get mixed up with this herd? ' What could I reply to that? I had to say something, so I answered, "Must have strayed in Or could be his herd companions have abandoned him But doesn't he look glorious all by himself among all those cattle?" I kept wondering why he should happen to be there all by himself and, try however hard and long I could, I was unable to come up with a plausible explanation

Keeping the stag in sight, we moved ahead I was fascinated by his

antlers. I casually put my hands on my ears and felt my flesh-ear-rings. *Do I also look as special and imposing as that stag?* I asked myself.

Time and again I had probingly questioned mother about my ear-rings. She was unable to give me any satisfactory explanation. Once I asked her bluntly, "Aren't Shon and I brothers? Why doesn't he have flesh-ear-rings also?" She glanced fearfully at my flesh-ear-rings and kept silent. Composing herself, she said, "Don't ask me. Ask your father." Her face filled with anxiety when she said this.

I approached father and put the same question. He gave me a very strange answer. "Ask Mother Ganga," he said. "If you get any answer at all, you'll get it from her."

I was lost in thought. How could Ganga-mata give an answer to that? Could a river speak? Oh, these weird elders and their ways! Why do they have to talk to young ones in that way?

That evening, avoiding everyone, I made my solitary way to the bank of Ganga-mata. Sitting there, I asked each rippling wave: *Why am I the only one with flesh-ear-rings*? Not a single wave replied. That day it seemed to me that all the world's elders were cheats. Their only aim was to keep young people in the dark—or why should even the revered elderly Ganga-mata also keep silent?

Next evening, while practising archery, I asked Shon the same question. "Tell me, Shon, and tell me true, why don't you have flesh-ear-rings?" His reply astounded me. "I don't know," he said, "but I'll tell you this: I just love your ear-rings! When you are sleeping at night, they glitter like stars. Their soft-blue glow lights up your pink cheeks."

I gaped at him. He wasn't lying, and I knew anyway he wouldn't lie to me. A host of questions flooded my mind. I had flesh-ear-rings that *no* one else had! Glittering ear-rings. Why were they given *only* to me? Who was I? I shook Shon by his shoulders and asked, "Shon, who am I?"

He gazed his heart's fill on my trembling ear-rings and said innocently, "Vasu-bhaiya, my elder brother."

I released his shoulders. His reply did not solve my problem. I gazed in front of me. The resplendent sun had splashed the vast sky with countless colours; it was slowly becoming invisible; and in my mind the relentless curiosity about my ear-rings deepened.

8

Try however hard I did, I wasn't able to sleep that night. Curiosity is like a restless horse Pull in the reins of your thoughts as much as you like, it keeps galloping ahead I tossed this side and that One question kept dancing in front of my eyes: *Why these ear-rings? Why on my ears? I am told they glint at night. What kind of glinting? Why?* I jerked up on my bed. From the side of my eyes I tried vainly to see if the ear-rings realy did glint My ears refused to come within the range of my vision I became impatient How would I be able to see my own ears? I kept wondering about this for a long time It was all so puzzling. For a moment I thought I should wake Shon and ask him if my ear-rings were really glinting or not But he was deep in peaceful slumber in mother's lap Waking him would mean waking her as well Father was away in Hastinapura What on earth was I to do? Suddenly I recalled Father's words "Ganga-mata will answer your question some day " Silently I crept out of bed Fearfully I opened the door of the hut and made my way to Ganga-mata. The sky sparkled with white, bright, tightly-packed stars Shon did say once, "Your ear-rings shine like stars " So I stared intently at the stars, trying to divine their special dazzle It wasn't satisfactory. Plantain tree leaves rustled incessantly Champanagari was as silent and tranquil as the inner shrine of a temple Occasionally there was the noise of neighing from a nearby stable The faint, hazy starlight made the road in front of me a blur I hurried my steps Cool gusts of breeze caressed my body I had forgotten to bring my upper garment along. After a long time I reached the river bank Daytime's gigantic receptacle of leaping waters was at night a profound contiguous gentleness Daytime's vast receptacle that seemed to touch the horizon was humbled in the kingdom of Night Only the endless lapping of waves that tongued the sand pebbles .. The rhythmic beat deepened the silence of the place I stood transfixed, drinking in the music of that silence For a second I forgot that I had come to ask a question Lost in thought, I entered the enveloping waters of Ganga-mata The stars were reflected purely in the serene waters. Two stars shone with a special sparkle Occasionally a wave would roll up and lengthen the stellar reflection I bent low to scoop up water for the sacred *anjali* The two stars shone brigher. I lowered my face very close to the water The two stars were my ear-

rings! They shone gently in the deep mirror of the Ganga As the waves rolled, they seemed to elongate themselves I stared intently at my face's reflection Two flesh-ear-rings throwing a bluish circular glow .. A blurred glow that reflected my face My ear-rings glowed at night—this secret I learnt from Ganga-mata But why glowing ear-rings for me only? Who was I? Who?

I stood in the waters One doubt was cleared But the second remained "Why these glowing ear-rings for me only?" I stood still in the water for over three hours At dawn I heard the temple bell and remembered my thatched hut Mother must be worried seeing me absent I decided to return quickly even as the dark shades scattered in the east Merged in the kingdom of darkness, the vast receptacle of Ganga-mata again seemed to join hands with the encompassing blue sky Just as after a first burst of rain, from out the lap of mother earth, slowly, a seed sprouts, so, from the womb of Ganga-mata, in the distance, the Sun God emerged I looked at him I felt at peace Almost unconsciously I scooped water in my cupped palm With closed eyes, I slowly offered the *arghya*-water to the Sun, and returned home

The night-blurred path was now clearing Champanagari, which was in the night like an inner shrine of a temple, now opened like a flag fluttering atop the temple Mother asked, "Where did you go?" She looked upset

"To the bank of Ganga-mata You never told me, but Ganga-mata did—she showed me how my ear-rings glowed "

Mother looked at me with extreme fear The same strange fear with which she sometimes looked at me She wanted to ask something more from me To avoid the question, I quickly dashed outside

9

In front of Parnakuti was a huge banyan It wasn't a tree—it was a bird-city populated by myriad-coloured and myriad voiced birds When tiny red fruit loaded the banyan in summer, it seemed that countless twinkling stars had spangled a tree sky And the delight that filled the bird-denizens then! Their varied chirpings could only be ways of communicating their joy to each other For hours I would listen to their warbling, oblivious to myself I wanted so much to be like that tree! I wanted birds to delight in the fruits that would grow

on me! And I wanted the king of birds, Garuda himself, who disdained perching on trees, to come and visit me Garuda, who ate only slithering snakes, would approach me and say haughtily, "*Chhee*! I wasn't born to peck at such soft fruit " And I would fold my leafy hands and beg him, "Lord of birds! Don't eat the fruit But stay and rest here for a while " He would relax briefly and, before soaring up high, gently pluck one small fruit Exhilarated by this placatory gesture of the king of birds, I would clap my countless leaf-hands in joy And the vines and creepers curling around me like upper garments would flap in the sky with ecstasy

I looked at the banyan It was shaped like a mace On top, a circular mass of branches, below, the sttong trunk Suddenly I heard a noise—*khad*! I turned in its direction Our neighbour, the charioteer Bhagadatta, was flicking his whip I looked at him surprised He twined the whip round his neck and said, "What's wrong, Vasu? Why are you staring?"

"Nothing I was looking at the birds," I replied

"Birds on this banyan? If you really want to see birds, you should go to the forest and see the *ashoka* tree There's mostly crows on this banyan They're the only ones who relish over-ripe, rotten fruits " He flicked the whip handle at the fruits on the ground

"Crows?'

"Yes Larks, vultures, kokilas and other birds stray in here You do see a kokila or two come by, but only when seduced by a female "

' Seduced? ' I asked curiously

"*Arre*, the kokila lays her egg secretly in the crow's nest The egg's shape and colour are exactly like a crow's egg The crow never once suspects there's some other egg in her nest She broods the kokila's egg And so, the musical enchanter of one and all is reared in the crow's nest " He curled the whip around his neck

"Kokila—in a crow's nest?" I gave the matter deep thought How could that happen? What proof was there that Bhagadatta was telling the truth? And suppose he was—for a moment—speaking the truth, well, so what? What harm was there in that? It could very well be that kokilas grew up in crows' nests But that didn't turn a kokila into a crow, did it? Come spring, and the kokila's mellifluous voice made the truth apparent—"I am a kokila I am a kokila "

10

One day all the children of the town were out on a plateau-like field, playing. One of them had the bright idea of playing "Kings and Courtiers". Aren't children the rishis who are the *real* creators? That day they bodied forth the reality of a royal court. The tough and hefty ones appropriated the respectable posts of treasurers, grooms, generals, ministers, advisers and others. Strange how they got to know all about the intrigues of court politics!

In the centre was a huge boulder, embedded in the earth. That became the Throne. Shon was playing General. I went to call him, because father had just returned from Hastinapura to the village. The minute he returned, he gave me a wonderfully happy piece of news: he would take me back with him to Hastinapura. He told me about a brilliantly learned, skilled-in-arms guru named Drona in Hastinapura, and he wanted me to train under him for war-combat. I immediately thought of Shon, but he was not in Parnakuti. I decided that I would tactfully pass on the news to him, because I was afraid that he might stubbornly insist that mother and father see that he accompanied me to Hastinapura. Persuading Shon was no easy job for any of us.

As soon as I reached the high ground, the boys began shouting, "Call Vasu! Call Vasu!" Shon joyfully lifted his hands and said loudly, "Vasu-bhaiya, come here, quick!" I rushed to him. They ringed me, screaming, and I couldn't for a second make out what they were saying. "Raja—Vasu—Ear-rings—General"—these and other strange words assailed my ears. I raised both hands, and finally I outshouted them: "Shut up!" The clamour quickly subsided.

"We've organised a Royal Court. We're missing a proper king. So we're going to make you king, because of your flesh-ear-rings," Brahmadatta said on behalf of all of them. They shouted approval.

"*Arre*! I've come to fetch Shon," I protested.

"Oh-o! No, not Shon. The General. And a Maharaja doesn't go to call a General. It's us attendants who are ordered to do such jobs," mischievous Bahuketu spoke up cleverly.

"And *you* are the General! Do you think it's right of you to call the Maharaja by his name? '*Arre*, Vasu, come here,' that's what you said. If the General himself breaks the rules, what can you expect

from the army?" Brahmadatta the Vizier cautioned Shon

I hesitated, but they caught me by my arm and ensconced me on the black-stone throne Bending low with deep respect, Brahmadatta said, "Lord of Champanagari! Maharaja Vasusena—"

And the others joyfully concluded, "Victory to him!" and sat down There was no escape now for me, so I royally proclaimed, "Vizier, I hereby permit you to open the proceedings before the court assembly "

The proceedings began, but the loud shouts of victory had irritated a massive bull that was grazing in the nearby field along with other animals His bushy tail swung up stiff and erect Nostrils puffing, snorting fiercely, ears perked in the direction of the noise, horns pointed forward, he straightened his ears and charged towards us Brahmadatta saw his horrendous form approach and, sprinting helter-skelter for safety, with upraised arms, shouted, "General—Maharaja—Run! Run!—Disaster—in the kingdom "

Just as rain water spreads quickly in all directions, the boys scattered in no time Shon kept tugging at my arm and pulling I swiftly stood up straight, on the stone I pulled Shon up and made him stand behind me The bull sped towards us like a hurricane His eyes were flaming He was bent on crushing everything in his path Saliva dripped from his mouth, occasionally gleaming as the sunlight fell on it He halted briefly as he came near the stone His hooves scraped and scratched the earth and, his horns pointed straight ahead, he plunged forward like an arrow I glanced briefly at the sky With just his two hands the Sun-God was controlling, effortlessly, the innumerable horses of his chariot Before I had time to think, I pushed Shon aside, and the next instant I had firmly grasped the bull's horns Shon's scream "B-h a-i-y-a!" came to my ears indistinctly What happened after that, I don't remember clearly The more that beast tried to gore and toss me, the tighter I entwined my hands around his horns My body felt like the searing iron wheel of a rushing chariot Who was Vasu? Where was he?—I knew nothing

When my eyes opened, I found myself in the same field, but my head was cradled in my mother's lap Father was standing nearby, he was holding the bull by the nose rope The red-eyed, leaping bull now stood still, fatigued and panting His mouth was foaming Shon was standing beside my head, staring at me intently Seeing me

open my eyes, he gave me a smile I looked around Brahmadatta, Virabahu and their companions, so frisky a while ago, had re-grouped I recalled the Royal Court, and it seemed that only a little while ago a flaming strength had entered my body And just as quickly the strength vanished—I had no idea where I felt drained But there was no pain in my body, I hurriedly sat up I examined my body for any wounds Not a scratch anywhere I stood up I took the nose-rope from father's hands, and smartly slapped the hump of the panting bull He shivered in fear He tucked his tail between his legs and shrank back The bull's keeper was standing nearby I passed the bull's rope to him He stared at me in wide-eyed surprise and walked away, leading his bull And so the Royal Court ended

11

That evening I got a full report of what happened Shon narrated how the bull had tried every method of overthrowing me, but failed completely For two hours he leapt around, tossing his horns, and jerking his body in weird contortions He jumped, he scratched at the ground with his hooves, but in the end he tired and stood still Foam flecked his mouth, he panted and snorted heavily In the meantime Shon rushed home and returned with father, who managed to slip the rope through the beast's nose But he had a difficult time getting me to release the bull's horns I was told that touching my body then was like touching fire

I became pensive I had grappled with a wild beast for two hours—and not a scratch showed on my body! Why? How did my body become so hot that merely touching it caused blisters?

I asked Shon curiously, "Shon, have you ever been hurt while playing?'

He replied, "Many times There was this time when I dived deep in the Ganga There was a jagged rock below My head struck it, and suddenly I saw stars When I emerged, I saw the water all red My head hurt Brahmadatta had pulled me out, and crushed some leaves with a rock and squeezed the medicinal sap on my head, I don't know what I haven't said a word of this to mother, because I know she'll be very upset Remember—not a word!" He bent his head and showed me the scar

When Shon gets hurt, he bleeds My body, when hurt, should bleed too I rose abruptly and went straight to Parnakuti, where a

cache of bows and arrows was arranged in a row. Swiftly I pulled out one arrow. Its sharp head shone like a ray of moonlight. I lifted the arrow above my head. Yes, its sharp point was aimed at my foot. I let go the shaft. It will pierce my foot, I thought, and, trembling, I closed my eyes. Dazzling rings of light swam in front of my eyes. The arrow struck my foot, but I felt no more than as if a grass blade had pricked me. The shaft's point had not penetrated my skin. I thought: My aim was wrong. I threw it at my foot again and again. Not once did the point pierce my flesh. I gazed intently at my foot. Not even the tiniest scratch! The demon of curiosity and doubt began dancing before me, leaving a trail of questions. Holding the arrow, madly I plunged it in my thigh, my arm, my chest, my stomach—wherever I could—with my full strength. But there was no place that it could penetrate. Why? Was my skin invulnerable? A lightning flash of doubt sped across one end of my mind to the other. Yes, my entire body was made of impenetrable flesh-armour. Impenetrable flesh-armour! Amazing!—Even if I were to jump off a speeding chariot, I would not get hurt. No stone, no rock, no weapon could ever wound me. No wound ever!—Meaning I would never die. Never die! My golden skin would shine for ever. I was immortal. My skin was invulnerable. That's why I wasn't even scratched when I grappled with the fierce bull. I had received the gift of special armour. My ears flash with special dazzling rings. Shon is my own brother. Yet Shon has neither special armour nor special ear-rings. Only me—why is it only me who's received all this? Who am I? Who am I? The sandpiper of doubt hammered its shrill cry in the sky of my mind. A fire of topsy-turvy thoughts blazed up. It struck me that I was different from others, very different. These thoughts pained me. The Radha-mata whose milk I sucked, whose flesh-and-blood was my inheritance, who accepted any burden and toiled incessantly for me—should I not be eternally grateful for the love she showered on me? "Vasu-bhaiya! Vasu-bhaiya!"—the loving brother who innocently day and night repeated my name—wasn't it all a deception then? My mind rebelled and harshly warned me: "*Who am I?* Don't scream this like a madman. Remember: you are the son of Adhiratha and Radha. You are Karna, the charioteer's son. You are Shon's elder brother Karna. You are a charioteer in a family of charioteers. A *charioteer.*"

12

The next day father told me to get ready because we were going to Hastinapura. Obediently I began putting all the necessaries in one place. My mind seethed with thoughts. It was farewell to Champanagari now. All her sky-kissing trees—the flame-of-the-forest, the seven-leafed *sapta-parna*, the *andani*, the mahua, the trumpet-flower, the *khadira*—were going to be separated from me. The *patra-rathas*, eagles, kokilas, red sheldrakes, pigeons and other birds were all going to be distant from me. Brahmadatta, Viramitra, Bahuketu and other friends—I was going to be alienated from them. I was going far away from lovely Parnakuti which was situated under the thick shade of the banyan, and which had showered affection on me for fourteen years. And my mother Radha who loved me more than life itself, who reared me like a young calf, who tended me like a baby deer—I was leaving her too, and going who knows how far away. Whose breast-milk had not yet dried on my lips—that dear mother of mine—and I was going away, leaving her with nothing except tears. "Vasu-bhaiya! Vasu-bhaiya!"—who never tired repeating these words—that watchful, blameless, innocent Shon—I was going away from him too. And the thing that really pricked me was that I would never see the Sun-God as he climbed up on the vast waters of Ganga-mata and roused such profound inspiring feelings in me. I was off to Hastinapura! What was Hastinapura like? I had heard of its huge palaces. Massive gymnasia, gigantic arsenals packed with weapons, stables with rows of handsome neighing horses, and imposing temples whose domes caressed the sky like *sapta-parna* trees. And countless warriors too, with chests like huge doors of gateways, with strong arms and thighs. I had heard it was the capital of the Kuru dynasty. Where was it situated, I wondered.

Deep in thought, I wasted no time and kept placing near the chariot whatever I could lay hands on. Meanwhile, Shon turned up, and lent me a helping hand. He still had no idea that I was leaving too. He said, "Vasu-bhaiya, wouldn't it be wonderful if father brought his chariot here every time? We'd have a great time driving around in it!" I didn't reply. How was I going to explain to him that I was leaving him today? Father started yoking the horses to the chariot. Shon brought each horse to him. I stopped and sought mother's blessing at the gate. She raised me and smelt my head for a

long time She pressed me to her heart and said distractedly, 'Remember this, Vasu Never enter any deep waters of the Ganga " Tears trickled down her cheeks Two dropped on my head I horripilated My blood coursed with the swiftness of wind Each drop of my blood was saying to the tears with the tenderest love, "Mother, how can I assure you that I will do as you say? I can only say even if death itself threatens your Vasu, he won't swerve a jot from the path of truth "

She remembered something, and returned to Parnakuti Quickly she placed a small silver casket in my hand In an anguished tone she said, "Vasu, whenever you think of me, remember to have a darshan of this casket See me in this casket Treasure it, saying, 'This is my mother' "

I packed the casket tightly in my upper garment Once again I sought her blessing With trembling hands, she placed a few drops of curd in my palm, which I reverentially swallowed I gazed full and long at the entire Parnakuti, filling my vision I turned The chariot was ready Shon was asking father something Father asked me to sit in the chariot

Hardly had I sat down than Shon asked father, "Where's Bhaiya going?" So far he had a look of dismay, now his eyes filled with tears

"I'm taking him to Hastinapura Why don't you go in?" Father slapped the reins hard on the horses' backs while saying this The horses raced ahead Shon raised his hand and shouting, "Bhaiya, wait! Wait!", he ran behind them Mother stepped forward and held him back I breathed a sigh of relief The chariot picked up speed Shon freed himself from mother's grasp I could see his small frame from a distance, running towards me Clutching his upper garment in one hand, the other uplifted, he continued running We had reached the town limits I had thought Shon would give up and go back But he kept on running with one hand upraised I asked father to halt Seeing us slow down, he ran even faster What amazing pluck that sweet and simple little boy Shon had! He wanted to accompany me—that's why he ran all the way, forgetting everything else What obduracy! No, not stubbornness—it was his spontaneous and pristine love for me Panting, he caught up with us Sweat drenched his young face Though fatigued, he jumped inside the chariot Sobbing, panting, he gasped jerkily, "You're leaving me and going! Isn't that it, Bhaiya? If you go I go with you I won't go

back!" I glanced at Pita-ji. He made a spot decision, "Good. Come with us." Overjoyed, Shon embraced me. I wiped the drops of sweat off his face with my upper garment. Truly, I was a lucky one to have so loving a brother!

The familiar outskirts of the town were left behind. Champanagari vanished in the thick surrounding foliage. My childhood also started fading. The greenery which bore the stamp of my boyhood bit by bit started to disappear. The *vakula*, *khadira*, and *dandavi* trees were all left behind. Champanagari's mushroom-shaped thatched hut and other houses faded in the distance. The plateau where two days ago we had played Raj-Sabha came into view. The black stone-slab in its centre stood alone, heated in the sun. The imaginary throne on which I was honourably ensconced as the reigning king— the throne of Maharaj Vasusena—silently bid me farewell. I raised my hands and respectfully prayed for blessings from the stone and from Champanagari. My life was racing away from the verdure of childhood—from Champanagari to Hastinapura.

13

Hastinapura! The prosperous and puissant capital of the Kurus! City of heroic warriors! City of varied artisans! City of my vivid imagination! City about which I had only heard from father—that city, after a month, slowly came into my sight. The domes of palaces and temples stood transfixed in the womb of the sky. And the Ganga flowed gently by, laving the city with her loveliness. Countless birds sang and sported on her banks in a sweet chaos. On left and right, for about six miles, there were only rows of tall mansions, cow-sheds, stables, temples and gymnasia. Our chariot was entering the capital of the illustrious, pure-souled Kaurava monarch Dhritarashtra. My life's chariot would be travelling from now on this road only. *Would Ganga-mata give me the same companionship here that I received from her in Champanagari?* I asked myself. Our chariot drove towards the outer limits in a swirl of dust. Grooms were leading horses to water-troughs; cowherds returning with cows with bells tinkling on their necks; women wending their way to the Ganga to fill their pitchers; ploughs atop shoulders, peasants trudging back after a hard day's work in the fields—my eyes etched each scene vividly on the canvas of my heart.

The sun, wearily taking leave of the city, departed westwards His scattered rays drenched the clouds on the horizon in a medley of pink, orange, and other enchanting hues I gazed respectfully at the Sun weaving such lovely magic with his rays I thought I noticed on the Sun's face the same expression of sadness that one sees in a woman who parts with something very precious to her Near him was a single dark cloud That perhaps was why I felt what I felt It was as if, passing his setting rays like long loving fingers on Hastinapura's face, he was saying, "We will meet again tomorrow"

Our chariot entered by the main gate of the royal palace The gate-keepers welcomed father with respectful bows We halted near the stables As always, Shon jumped out first I kept looking at the palace from the chariot It looked as pretty as a new-born baby It was constructed entirely of white marble All of Champanagari could easily be fitted inside its huge circumference The white palace with its black ramparts looked like a black clay pot filled to the brim with a mound of salt Inside were a series of double courtyards and halls In the centre a circular pool, in which the countless rays of the setting sun played colourfully Multi-coloured fish and milk white long-necked swans frolicked in its waters White and blue lotuses swayed in the breeze On four sides were four lion statues carved in white stone In front were numerous stairs leading up to the palace I counted the steps One hundred and five! Did I miss a step or two? I re counted One, two, four, ten, twenty, fifty, hundred, one hundred and one, two, four, five, and one hundred and six *Arre!* The last time I counted there were one hundred and five How do I get a hundred and six now? I worried over this "A hundred and five or a hundred and six How does that affect me?" I adjusted my upper garment and was about to step on the pure and splendid ground of Hastinapura when suddenly a chariot pulled by seven black horses thundered in like a storm through the main gates A gate-keeper announced loudly, "Prince Duryodhana, the Jewel in the Crown of Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Monarch of Hastinapura!" The attendants, gate-keepers, and subjects sprang to attention Father turned and bowed in the direction of the chariot

Chacha-ji, when did you return from Champanagari?" Duryodhana smilingly asked as he descended from his chariot

'This very moment, Yuvaraj," father said humbly

From the chariot I looked at Prince Duryodhana He was about fourteen or fifteen years old He was dressed as a warrior, and

looked as radiant as Vishnu Himself The massive-headed mace in his hand made him look undisputably impressive He leapt out and approached father He had a distinctively haughty and imperious gait He walked the earth like a rutting elephant He was constantly adjusting his slipping upper garment with stylish jerks of his arms His lotus-eyes were piercing and lustrous, his nose dagger-straight and pointed I can't say why, but there was one thing about him I didn't like His thick and ugly eyebrows curved like a python able to crush the whole world in its sinuous folds

He glanced at me and asked father, "Chacha-ji, who's he?"

"My son Karna, Yuvaraj," father replied

"Karna Good But why did you bring him here today?"

"To show him your capital "

"Good Introduce him to the minister He'll take him round the city "

He entered like a hurricane, and returned like one, he ran up the stairs like lightning At the last but one step, he stopped, turned, and like a cloudburst dashed down the stairs and stood in front of us Gazing fixedly at my flesh-ear-rings he said, "These ear-rings of yours—you were born with them, no?"

"Yes," I answered, looking straight into his lotus-like eyes

"They make you very handsome So handsome that no one's going to believe you are Chacha-ji's son Don't you think so, Chacha-ji?" He placed his hand on my shoulder and laughed out loud as he said this Father was, I think, stunned He didn't say a word, just stood there, transfixed

The ink-black cloud must have shrouded the sun because the white, pure stone of the palace suddenly appeared smoky and grimy I felt suffocated Prince Duryodhana stormed away exactly as he had stormed in We kept staring at his fading figure

The shut-in earlier sky seemed now to open up into cloudlessness, because the hazy stairs became again pristine

Father parked his carriage in the chariot-house To save Shon the difficulty of climbing all these stairs, he took him to his rooms and returned We went up the palace steps to pay our respects to Maharaja Dhritarashtra Little bells of memory tinkled in the temple of my mind as I climbed the steps Father used to tell me stories of the heroic exploits of the Kuru dynasty, and these stories now sprang up from the deep recesses of my mind I was agog with fear, curiosity, respect, doubt, devotion, and a multitude of strange feelings

The illustrious Maharaja Hasti of the Solar Dynasty had founded this city after seeing the vast and pure Ganga flowing nearby His great-grandson Kuru turned out to be so extraordinary that the dynasty came to be known by his name The descendants were called Kauravas It was this same illustrious Maharaja Kuru who ordered this palace built

The Solar Dynasty boasted a learned monarch like Manu, a finest-of mortals like Puraravas, an Indra-vanquisher like Nahusha, an earth shaking world-conqueror like Yayati, Yayati's valiant sons Yadu and Puru, and others like Janamejaya, Ahamyati, Devatithi, Dushyanta Bharata Hasti and Ajamidha, naturally it was to be expected that Maharaja Kuru would be even more magnificent and virtue-laden since his reign, in the minds of his subjects, overshadowed the grandeur of his ancestors What kind of man was Maharaja Kuru? Why Maharaja Kuru only? Were his descendants any less splendid? Viduratha, Anashvan, Parikshit, Bhimsena, Parishravas and others constituted a dynastic garland in which each flower excelled its companion Maharaja Parikshit was truly a peak of Kuru glory Parishravas' son Maharaja Shantanu married a fisher-chief's daughter and set an example to the Kuru dynasty His brother Maharaja Devapi renounced the huge prosperous kingdom, as if it was nothing more valuable than a blade of grass, he was indeed the shining star of the Kuru tradition

Who knows how many joy-drenched days of triumph and victory this royal temple had witnessed?

Inside, we walked on, leaving behind one palatial splendour after another I let my eyes take in as much of the grandeur as possible The royal temple glowed with the splendours of the surrounding palaces Each palace stone pillar was finely sculpted Each pillar was carved out of a huge monolith On the palace walls the lives of the Kuru ancestors were displayed in beautiful paintings Near the gates of each palace, servants and maids stood by humbly, efficiently performing their various duties Here and there were smooth, beautiful statues of soldiers in different poses of combat and duel Also, in wooden cages one could see peacocks, kokilas, pigeons, *bhardavajas* and other birds, emitting weird cries—living artistic testimonials to Kuru glory

We approached Dhritarashtra's palace I gazed with ardent eagerness Maharaja Dhritarashtra sat on a gold ornamented dais, carved with fine inlay workmanship On his head was a beautiful

golden crown with multi-coloured embellishments. His royal vesture dazzled. He had large necklaces of ruby, pearl, and beryl, whose nimbus encircled his manly neck with soft-blue effulgence. The large-chested monarch looked most impressive on account of his thick, flowing white beard. But dark circles ringed his eyes, which seemed to be closed. On his right, just below him, on a simple white wooden seat sat a serene and refulgent man, one end of whose white upper garment, draped over his left shoulder, revealed his fair shining strong body as muscular as a plantain tree. His face was as round as a pot; his eyes gentle and serious; a large tilak graced his forehead. On the Maharaja's left stood a tall, formidable man holding a golden sceptre.

Father bowed low and respectfully greeted his monarch. He signalled me to do the same. I *pranamed.*

"Your majesty, your servant Adhiratha, chief of the Sutas, bows and salutes you. My son, Karna here, also salutes you in deepest homage," father said, bowing.

"Come. Tell me news, Adhiratha, of Champanagari. And is this son of yours the same who was born with flesh-armour and flesh-ear-rings? We have heard a great deal about the ear-rings and the impenetrable armour."

"Yes, Maharaja. This is he, Karna."

"Karna, child, come near." He stretched his hand in my direction.

Father nodded to me to approach the monarch. I quickly stepped forward. He groped forward and took my hand in his. I looked up at his face. The edges of his delicate, pink eyes were moist. The muscles around his eyes twitched restlessly in an effort to open them. Instead, what happened was that the water at the corners of his eyes trickled troublingly down his cheeks and into his beard. I touched his feet. He raised me up by my hand, cupped my face in his trembling hands, and fingered my ear-rings fully. There was a strange fascination in his quavering caresses. Raising his eyebrows and turning to his right, he said, "Vidura, it's really remarkable! He has flesh-ear-rings! Most extraordinary."

"Yes, Maharaja. And his body is protected by golden skin-armour." Then Vidura asked father, "Adhiratha, you are dark-complexioned. How did your son get to be golden-skinned?"

"Gurudev, he has his mother's complexion." Father stood with folded palms and said, "I have a prayer, Maharaja."

"What would you like, Adhiratha?"

"If my sons here could receive military training along with the princes—"

"Granted Go right now to Guru Drona-ji and register their names in his military school Do it today "

The Maharaja turned to the tall person on his left and said, "Vrishavarman, look after his needs "

"Your wish is a command, Maharaja " The minister saluted his monarch without, however, the slightest movement of the sceptre

We offered our homage also and came out of the palace I glanced in Vidura's direction before leaving I thought I saw a thin crease wrinkling his broad forehead It sometimes happens that though it is raining some place far away, lightning flashes in a cloudless sky—that thin crease was like such lightning, or so it seemed to me

14

From the city we proceeded to the military training centre I asked father, "What is wrong with Maharaja's eyes?"

"He's blind, my son That's why his wife, the Queen Mother Gandhari, out of sympathy has bandaged her eyes, so that she may not see this world "

'Raj-mata Gandhari devi?"

"Yes Prince Duryodhana's mother She has ninetynine other sons You'll see them in the training centre You'll also meet the Pandavas, sons of Maharaja Pandu "

"The Pandavas?"

"Yes The Kuru prince Pandu was the rightful heir to the kingdom, but the crown came to Dhritarashtra because of Pandu's untimely death Pandu had five sons They are called Pandavas by the citizens "

"Meaning that there are one hundred and five princes in the Kaurava dynasty Five Pandavas and the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra " I thought *How do all these princes behave with each other?*

"Also, two Maharajas and one grandfather—Pitamaha Bhishma" father explained

"Two Maharajas?"

"Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Vidura "

' How did Vidura become a Maharaja? Only a little while ago you called him Gurudeva "

"You're right, son Gurudeva Vidura is Maharaja Dhritarashtra's brother, but he has resolved to become a royal sannyasi'

What's sannyasi?

"A sannayasi is one who renounces everything the kingdom, the palace, all this splendour—he has no claim on any of these"

"Why does he live here then?'

"To prevent his blind brother's kingdom from falling apart Each word he says here is respected So is the Pandavas' mother, Queen Kunti-devi"

"Raj-mata Kunti-devi" I was on the point of questioning again, when suddenly from a nearby grove a kokila trilled its "Ku-oo-ku-oo" and swished over our heads from an *ashoka* tree Looking at it, I recalled Bhagadatta, who had once observed that the kokila, which sings a full range of seven notes, is reared by a mother crow because its own mother lays her egg in a crow's nest Crazy Bhagadatta! Who cares where a kokila is reared? It's enough that at the right time its all-enchanting melody fills the countryside

We came to an impressive temple to Bhagavan Vishnu Its spire's cupola was made of gold, it dazzled in the background of the blue sky in the sinking light of the setting sun, and the rays seemed to turn into gold

"The dome was ordered by the Maharaja," father said, pointing towards it

I thought The king who ordered the golden cupola is blind He cannot see the splendours of his own kingdom It must have been a blind fate indeed that cruelly placed a king amidst such glories and took away his eyesight A hundred sons and a limitless magnificent kingdom—should such a raja be called blessed?—or woebegone, because he lacked the eyes to see all this? How did this blind father recognise his hundred sons? Most important, how did a sightless monarch manage to rule such a vast and flourishing kindgom? *Chhee!* There are some questions that have no answers

"Remember, son, you must touch Gurudeva's feet the moment you see him," father advised as we walked

"Pita-ji, what does Gurudeva look like?' I asked eagerly

"How do *I* know? You'll see him"

We hurried our pace The roads swarmed with people Tall mansions flanked the thoroughfares Temple cupolas silhouetted the sky Tinkling echoes of temple bells filled the air. Grooms led

horses, and women with pitchers wended their way to the Ganga. The bazars were packed with citizens

After a long time we reached a massive main gate of iron On both sides extended black stone boundary walls narrowing into the far distance On the imposing arch of the iron gate fluttered a triangular saffron pennant The gatekeepers welcomed us in. We bent low and entered the military training centre of the Kurus

On all four sides were large rooms, and in the centre a huge arena, of four miles' circumference, divided in various sections The wrestlers' section was a circular area strewn with fine red dust, where a pair of youthful wrestlers were engaged in duel one after the other In the dead centre a muscular fair-skinned youth danced and clapped challenge None dared to go near him With uplifted arms he strutted all over the place

"Karna, that's Prince Bhima He's daring one and all to fight him," father pointed and explained

Another area was reserved for equestrian skills Lanes were marked out for horses to be ridden abreast Periodic ditches had been dug to serve to be ridden abreast. Other ditches had been dug to serve as obstacles Some were filled with water Walls had been erected at intervals One could see many young horse-riders exercising their horses by clearing these obstacles On the eastern side was a playground for the practice of sword-fights One side was studded with poles, hung with various types of armour and small and large shields Many warriors were engaged in sword-combat, furiously lunging at each other The clang of sword on sword echoed in the arena On the west was a similar circular playground, where mock mace-fights were in progress The contestants roared as they circled each other Javelins, spears, fire-spitting *shataghnis* and other weapons each had their own practice areas in that huge arena All the stone-constructed rooms were packed with a multitude of varied weapons In the arena a tall, huge-dimensioned rostrum for training in the art of aiming at moving objects so fashioned that, no matter from which part one looked, it always appeared to be in the dead centre of the arena On top of the rostrum were flower-decorated bows of various sizes and shapes On one side were countless arrow-filled quivers In front were the targets On the rostrum sat a dark-skinned warrior in fighting posture, placing his body's weight on his right foot He had pulled the bow-string taut, up to his ear One eye closed, he focused his other eye in line with

the point of the arrow. Near him, in loose robes, stood a tall old white-bearded man with his hair upknotted. His posture was as still as the deepest part of a river. He aligned the dark youth's string-pulling hand. He was explaining something. The youth listened attentively.

Father pointed and said, "Son, this is Pandu's son, the bow-expert Prince Arjuna. Instructing him is the revered guru Drona himself."

The expert archer Arjūna ! Whoever he was—but couldn't he have struck a more impressive warrior-pose ? The thought came suddenly to my mind.

Gurudeva Drona really looked as striking as an *ashoka* tree. His tall figure and his white dress together looked most impressive.

We used the arena path to go to the rostrum. I felt my blood pulsing with increased warmth as I gazed at the nearby training grounds. I wanted to enter them and swiftly practise the mace and the sword with all the contestants. I wanted to give these fresh, frisky horses a real work-out, till their mouths foamed. I wanted to swing the elephants by their trunks and, after exhausting them, mount their backs. As for the youth on the rostrum, I wanted to lift him up by his arm and show him how a first-rate-warrior pose was struck. And arrogant Bhima, cavorting in the wrestling area—I wanted to wrestle the pride out of him !

We reached the tall rostrum of the archery field. Prince Arjuna, from his high perch, fired an arrow which sliced clean into the distant wooden target. Guru Drona slapped Arjuna's shoulder and roared, "Splendid, Arjuna ! But go and check how deep your sharp-feathered shaft's embedded in the target." Arjuna rose obediently and resolutely walked up to the target. Father stepped forward in the meantime and, from beneath the rostrum, he offered his reverence to Drona. I glanced in the direction of Guru Drona. He was facing west. The rays of the setting sun gleamed with soft beauty on his white beard. His beard's long thick white hair flowed to his stomach. A few locks fluttered in the breeze. Lines of ash smeared his forhead, his arms, and his bare stomach. On his striking forehead, age had carved a network of wrinkles. His nose was straight and pointed. His eyebrows were pure-white; his eyes glowed with an other-wordly yet serene self-confidence. I bowed before him with deep reverence. It was father's wish that I be trained in war-skills under the tutelage of Guru Drona.

"This is my son Karna," father introduced me

I was sure he was going to ask about my flesh-ear-rings He could not care less, he only said, "Your son, Adhiratha? How is it you have brought him to the military training centre?"

"To leave him in your care "

"Why in *my* care?"

"If he can pick up a little war-skill along with the other princes "

"With the princes? Adhiratha, war-skills are a Kshatriya's prerogative You can get your son admitted here, but you cannot expect him to learn with the Kshatriya princes "

Father's face fell What should he say? He was nonplussed In the end, he fumbled, "As Gurudeva wishes "

Paying our respects once again to Gurudeva, we prepared to leave We met Prince Arjuna on the way, he was returning after plucking the arrow out of the target I studied him carefully His complexion was sky-blue, his chin sharp as a spear-point, his lustrous eyes curved in the direction of his temples, his nose straight and pointed, his forehead broad as a platter, he had beautiful eyebrows, indeed, his entire face enchanting In a sweet bell-like voice he asked father, "Have you come today from Champanagari, uncle?"

"Yes I've brought my son Karna too "

Arjuna glanced at me More than my eyes, he seemed to be fascinated by my flesh ear-rings He was on the point of asking me something when a serpent-like creature slithered and fell from above between us Stupefied, we stepped back two paces All looked up in fear and utter curiosity A large dust-coloured vulture was flapping its huge wings and circling in the sky,twisting its strong neck periodically and casting its keen sight on the earth below where a black snake lay motionless, the vulture's intention being presumably to recover it The impact of the fall had temporarily stunned the snake Then, it wriggled and bared its fangs like an open hand Hissing a couple of times, it waved its portentous hood but swiftly slithered away, in fear of his life, wherever he got the chance With lightning speed Prince Arjuna fitted the arrow to his bow, and took aim even as he sprinted ahead In the meanwhile came a shout from the rostrum, "Arjuna, don't aim!" A strangely powerful voice Prince Arjuna instantly did as ordered, as if singed by fire With arrow-swiftness, the snake slid and disappeared in the stone boundary of the stadium The voice roared from the rostrum

again, "Yuvaraj, before killing a petty snake, kill the snake that's within you. Anger is a terrible snake. Never harm the weak."

We looked at the rostrum—it was Gurudeva Drona.

A youth hurriedly approached Arjuna—a tall young man with a serene expression. He placed his hand on Arjuna's shoulder and said sweetly, "What made you take aim without thinking?"

Arjuna stood silent. I looked at father questioningly about that tall youth; he whispered in my ear, "Yuvaraj Yudhishthira."

Instantly all the students of that magnificent stadium encircled Arjuna, and chorused, "What's it? What's it?" I stepped out of the melee, and intently surveyed the stadium. Tomorrow I would be starting my training here. But one question kept buzzing in my head: What was preventing my getting trained alongside the princes? Only a little while ago, Gurudeva had explained that war-skills were exclusive to Kshatriyas. What did "Kshatriya" mean? Was I a Kshatriya or not? If not, how do I become one?

Registering my name and Shon's in the school, we came out by the massive main gate. Father was exceptionally quiet. I broke the silence by asking, "Pita-ji, why can't I get training along with the princes?"

"Because, my child, you are not a Kshatriya," he replied.

"What's 'Kshatriya'?"

"Anyone born in a royal family is a Kshatriya. You were born to a charioteer, my child," he explained and gently patted my back.

"Lineage! Are the royally born blessed with hundreds of arms? *Why do they get this special importance?*"

"You won't understand. From tomorrow see that you turn up regularly at school here. Take pains to learn well whatever they teach you."

I wasn't satisfied by his reply. Like a madman's mind, mine started comparing Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Gurudeva Drona. What was the similarity between Hastinapura's Maharaja Dhritarashtra on the one hand—he who lovingly cupped my face in his hands and tried to "see" my flesh-ear-rings with his unseeing eyes—and the respected Guru Drona on the other—he who would not so much as even glance at my lovely ear-rings? In point of fact, Gurudeva was *so* different from the Maharaja. He was saying, "Don't strike the weak." Was he shrewd or was he just undignified—this Gurudeva of the Kauravas who called a snake a weakling? Had he no inkling that this black snake could in a trice

poison Arjuna black-and-blue? Wasn't it an ominous sign that a snake had slithered between Prince Arjuna and me? *Chhee*! How weird the human mind is! That was just a mere coincidence But the sight of Garuda brought back to me the repeated question of Shon· "Bhaiya, are you going to be like Garuda, soaring ever and ever higher?" Silly Shon! I have seen with my own eyes Garuda rooting for his food in the ground like any common crow If he didn't need food he'd be up there, fixed in the sky, all the time

We returned to the palace Shon was waiting for us, exactly as before in the room Near him was the minister, Vrishavarman A dusty dusk was settling on the royal grounds, which looked as impressive as the sky—but forlorn I, father, Shon and the minister entered one of the palace's south-facing rooms Father's room A small window opened on the east I poked my head out I could see, far away, the blurred stone boundary wall of the arena The Ganga's waters circled serenely around it All Hastinapura seemed to be sliding into a slow stupor, like a child tired out after a day of play An attendant entered with a torch and lit the large stone lamp, filled with *ingudi* oil, placed in a corner The shadowed faces of the minister, father, and Shon focused clearly

"Suta chief," asked the minister confidently, "what happened? Your son got admitted, didn't he?"

"Yes," father replied briefly He seemed lost in deep thought

"Good If you need anything at all, just inform the attendant outside I'll take leave of you now " The minister left

An attendant brought us dinner from the kitchen After eating, we began chatting Shon naturally was the one who had all the questions But my mind was somewhere else I sat on my bed and gazed at the small glowing flame of the stone lamp Anything that glowed, always attracted me mysteriously One by one events of the past came and stood in front of my eyes I wanted to weave a colourful garland with them Running behind the chariot, Shon—with hand uplifted—crying Father, determined and unswerving, but melting seeing Shon's condition Prince Duryodhana, bursting on us like a storm, as soon as we passed the portals of Hastinapura's palace His strutting gait He was the first Kuru warrior I had laid eye on How affectionately he spoke about my flesh-ear-rings! He had placed his hand on my shoulder—and looked at me with such familial intimacy! Yes, to be a prince was to be like Duryodhana, determined and impressive! And his father Dhritarashtra, who

cupped and "saw" my face with the feeling fingers of his hands Vidura, like a lotus in the pool in front of the palace Bhima, whirling on one leg, lost in his own thoughts in the wrestling ring Novice Arjuna, striking an archer's stance with his bow Ocean deep Drona, the guru whose mind could not be plumbed And Yudhishthira, who even as a child spoke with the wisdom of adults

As if mechanically, I tried weighing Prince Duryodhana and Arjuna, Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Gurudeva Drona, Vidura and Yudhishthira Not comparing—assessing Each was unique, with a distinct personality God alone knows how many different kinds of people there are in this world, with how many different natures Who conceived them in that way? And for what purpose? When you come to think of it, who is the brilliant Creator creating such a multitude of different specimens? For no two seem to be alike, or, if they seem to be, they turn out to be different *Chhee*! There are no final answers to these hotly debated questions

The *ingudi* oil in the stone lamp was slowly diminishing, its glow fading Shon had fallen fast asleep The day-long journey and walking about in the city had tired out father to the point of sleep I rose quietly, and softly blew out the dimming flame Acrid smoke from the snuffed lamp entered my nostrils I stretched out on my bed My first day in Hastinapura! Memories, like guests, are self-important, carefree creatures they knock at the mind's door whenever they like I suddenly remembered my mother Radha It distressed me to think that she was all alone now in our home Parnakuti in Champanagari—oppressively alone, all day long, day after day Forgetting that I was no more at home, she must be calling out again and again, "Vasu! Vasu!" A mother's love was indeed the fullness of all the loves in the three worlds When I left she gave a silver casket as a memento Why of all things did she decide to give her dear son this special gift? She had said, "Every time you think of me, remember to look at this casket Let this casket take the place of your mother " How simple she was! How could a lifeless casket be a substitute for a mother—how could the very idea occur to her? Mother, can thirst for milk be satisfied by buttermilk? But, come what may, I will always cherish your wishes No matter what, I'll keep your memory fresh till the last moment of my life I gently opened the cloth wrapped casket Respectfully I lifted it to my forehead and placed it on one side of the bed There were three people in the world whom I loved deeply My mother,

my father, and Shon In the same way, there were three things that attracted me deeply One Ganga-mata, who spoke to me in countless tongues with her countless waves, for hours on end Two Surya, who always inspired me with his glorious radiance Three this little gift of mother, this silver casket The casket reminded me of Champanagari My mind calf sucked the teats of mother-earth, memory streams of milk spurted forth, wrapped and lapped in sweetness, I slept, I did not know when

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I woke at dawn to bird song, opened the window, and gazed out Darkness was slowly lifting from the horizon The Ganga flowed through a silk-filmy mist All Hastinapura was slowly stretching awake Picking up a dried upper garment, I stepped out of the room There was no chance of anyone being there at this time, so I could bathe to my heart's content in the Ganga With this in mind, I walked towards the ghat All around me, the earth seemed still unwilling to dissipate the soft clinging mist How enchanting they looked—the mansions and roads draped in delicate obscurity A single bell tinkled in the temple on the ghat of the Ganga In that silent stillness only that single tinkle sounded with startling clarity I moved in its direction I remembered mother's warning "Don't ever step into the Ganga's waters " I smiled inwardly Mother was the apprehensive type! Who did she think I was—a suckling babe? I was full sixteen years old Me—afraid of that water? Lost in thought, I reached the ghat I placed my upper garment on the steps Tightening my lower garment, I gazed ahead Everything was clearly visible for about twelve cubits, beyond that, nothing but white mist I respectfully *namaskared* the spectacle, then dived into the water The water was warmish For about an hour I splashed about freely After an hour or so, the haze scattered I swam back to the ghat, changed, dipped and squeezed my garment dry, and placed it on the steps I stared ahead In the distance, the Sun-God was slowly climbing up the sky His soft rays caressed the waters awake I offered *arghya* to the Sun God in sacred *anjali* How profound and romantic he looked! Every day he appeared in a new form to me—or so it seemed Every day a wonderful manifestation, every day a wonderful radiance Today's compelling glory was never tomorrow's again Tomorrow's glory was a miraculous new

birth Seeing it, fresh hopes stirred in me Hundreds of thousands of miles away was that radiance—but I felt there was no distance, no difference between that radiance and me I felt mysteriously lightened in body My hands joined by themselves in prayer My eyes closed spontaneously In my mind I concentrated instinctively on that radiance For endless miles on miles I saw nothing but dazzling light—an intensely intense radiance Incandescent, but soothing and very desirable Without any reason I felt that there was a kinship between me and that effulgence, that there were unknown threads that linked me to that single ocean vast brilliance that scattered the darkness of the universe I lost myself and was transported, elevated higher and still higher on those threads

Today that radiance was all the more enchanting I joined my palms in peace and closed my eyes I became a single wave on an endless ocean of light—a wave that had no separate existence, a wave that probably didn't want to exist separately anyway One wave out of the countless others in that infinite ocean

I thought someone touched my shoulder At first I was not very sure it was a touch—but I *was* being shaken by the shoulder Opening my eyes slowly, I turned An old man with an excep tionally serene countenance was looking at me His beard, the hair on his head and on his eyebrows were all white as the whitest clouds Long lines of ash streaked his noble forehead His hand did not leave my shoulder—a heavy and powerful hand Who could this old man be? I strung a list of questions to my mind s bow No, I had not seen him anywhere before

He asked me with extreme affection, "Who are you, child?"

"Karna, the charioteer's son '

"Charioteer's son Which charioteer?"

"Champanagari's Adhiratha-ji's son "

"Adhiratha?"

"Yes, sir And " I asked expectantly, curiously

'I am Bhishma " His beard's locks rippled in the breeze

Bhishma! Grandsire Bhishma! Venerable Bhishma of the Kauravas and Pandavas! Bhishma, son of Ganga! The dome of the temple of the Kuru dynasty! Bhishma, the flag of the kingdom of warriors! For a moment my mind went numb The veritable hero-god of the Kauravas—in front of me, on the bank of the Ganga!

I stood there, like a blade of grass beside a massive banyan I had no idea what I should do Quickly I recollected myself and dipped in

homage before him He raised me instantly, and said sweetly, "You were immersed in your puja I intruded I hope you are not upset "

"No," I replied

"Really, child, I could not stop myself from breaking into your meditation "

I gazed at him in surprise After a pause he said, "For thirty years I have come here daily at this time on this bank of the Ganga, but not a single soul of Hastinapura has ever arrived here ahead of me At least I never saw any You are the first "

"Me?" What should I say next?

"Yes That is why I interrupted you—after a great deal of waiting " He looked at my flesh ear-rings and said, "How handsome you look with these ear-rings "

"I was born with them,' I replied

"Look after them well " He slowly stepped down the ghat's stairs His imposing hill-high figure gradually faded He stood neck-deep in the water His locks swam in the river His lock-shaded head looked lovely as a lotus on the waters From where I stood I made obeisance to him Draping half my upper garment around me, I returned to the palace My first day in Hastinapura had been blessed with a darshan of Grandsire Bhishma

That strange meeting intrigued me I had wanted so much to see Pitamaha Bhishma all day—and he had come personally and graced me! And that too, on the bank of the Ganga and at such an auspicious time of morning! How sweetly he spoke to me! How calm and pure his countenance—like the inner sanctum of a temple! That he should even deign to like anything about a simple charioteer's son like me! The elder maharaja of the Kauravas—that he should affectionately place his hand on my shoulder and enquire about my welfare! How truly great is a noble person who has humility! Blessed must be the family in which such a superlative, self-effacing person like Grandsire Bhishma takes birth! And how lucky I was to be a guest in such a splendid palace! I would now get repeated darshans of this great personality! His serene, compassionate eyes would gaze again on me! To the three whom I loved so deeply, a fourth was now added Pitamaha Bhishma

16

The instant I reached the palace, father advised me to get ready

The war arena! I was ready in to time. Shon, all dressed, had in fact been waiting for me for a long time. The casket mother had presented me had been carefully placed in an alcove, and I respectfully offered before it four coral blossoms of the *parijata* tree, the tree of paradise. Obeisance over, I whispered, "Bless me, mother. Your son Vasu has come to a major turning in his life. Today I start my military training."

Father shouted from outside, "Karna! Shon! Hurry up!" I peered out of the window. The Sun-God lit up the lands on the eastern horizon in sparkling laughter. His reflection in the waters of the Ganga seemed to give him two distinct identities from a distance: the sun-god of the sky and the sun-god of the earth. I took Shon's hand in mine and came out of the room.

Father, I and Shon entered the arena. There were many more youths there than yesterday, sitting around the central platform, reciting in a chorus, gravely and serenely chanting the early morning prayers.

"*Om! Isavasyam idam sarvam...*" "Om. All this is swaddled in God's glory..." The prayers continued for a long time. I asked father to go back.

"Remember: be disciplined," he said, and left. I gazed at the vast peaceful stadium. Soon the atmosphere was going to change like a crackle of storm-clouds from the east. All the different weapons were going to blend and resound in a splendid cacophony, made sharper by the shrill and fierce war-cries of the trainees.

The prayers ended. Gurudeva Drona, who was sitting in the centre, stood up solemnly, raised both his hands to our *pranama.* I was hoping that he would raise his hand to bless us also, but Arjuna happened to intervene just then and, placing his hand on Arjuna's shoulder, he left, chatting with his pupil. He did not have time even to glance in our direction. This was my first day in the war training arena. Somebody had told me that no education was ever successful without a guru's blessing. That was why I *pranamed* the great guru of the Kauravas—and who was this Prince Arjuna coming out of thin air to frustrate my hopes? Couldn't he have chosen some other time to appear? Was Gurudeva his personal possession? If one were to go by Gurudeva's words yesterday, was it true that only Kshatriyas could receive a guru's blessings? If so, then how could a charioteer's son like me ever aspire to be blessed? And assuming that I did get the blessing, that wouldn't change me into a Kshatriya, would it? Come to think of it, why should I want to become a

would it? Come to think of it, why should I want to become a Kshatriya at all? Why should I become a Kshatriya merely to obtain this guru's favour? Blessed or not blessed, it didn t matter—I *will* remain a charioteer's son I will remain the charioteer-son of father Adhiratha and mother Radha This guru's blessing was reserved exclusively for Kshatriyas, his knowledge was for Kshatriyas, he was a guru for Kshatriyas only How could he ever be *my* guru? Who then should I make my guru on this first day? Whose blessing would encourage me to proceed on my quest for knowledge? Was there anyone in this world ready to become the guru of a charioteer's son? None Why did Arjuna have to turn up now? Why was Gurudeva Drona so fond of him? They're guru and pupil, aren't they? I was soured I lowered my head and began to think Was it my fault I was not born in a royal family? Was there ever anyone who got the birth he desired? Who decides high and low birth? What makes a man great? His merit, surely? But who was going to listen to me? Was my first day going to be an exercise in futility? I was restless to start practising straight shooting with my bow and arrows *Chhee* ! I suppose some days are sent only to test a person What should I do? What?

In frustration I started circling the stone platform like a madman Once I thought of running straight up to Gurudeva Drona and telling him, "He alone is a guru who knows his pupil's mind What kind of thing is this that you have a pupil here thrashing like a fish out of water for your blessing—and you know nothing about it? Why do you give so much importance to Arjuna? What's so special about him? Look at me—I have shining flesh ear-rings My skin, deep yellow like the *kadali* tree, is unpiercable "

The next instant I remembered father's caution "Be disciplined " But how? Gurudeva Drona did not so much as glance at me So what should I do—go home in tears? What should I do?

As always, I gazed up at the eastern sky The Sun-God, like a red hot iron ball, was setting the blue dome of the sky on fire My disappointment vanished in a trice Indeed, what more powerful guru could there be in the three worlds than this splendid solar intensity? What need was there for me to beg blessings from anyone else? From today my only guru would be the Sun From today, puja only before him, from today, only his command mattered Instantly I climbed the stone platform, where lay a flower-decorated bow I lifted it as high as I could, and said, "World-darkness-dispelling

Sun-God! From today I am your disciple. Bless me. Show me the path." Touching the bow to my forehead, I bent low and *pranamaed* the solar divinity. Shon had come up unknown and was standing behind me. I said to him also, "Shon, *namaskara* Surya Deva. Ask for his blessing." He joined his palms respectfully. After a while, I lowered the bow to the ground.

We descended the platform steps. My mind was at peace. I could see Gurudeva Drona and Prince Arjuna approaching the front of the platform. Arjuna looked in my direction and smiled. I did not feel like smiling. It seemed to me that his smile was ironical.

I remembered Grandsire Bhishma. *This* Arjuna's grandfather! There was hardly anything similar between the two. What a world of difference between their natures and their behaviour! As he passed by, Arjuna asked for the sake of asking, "Who's this?"

"My younger brother," I said proudly.

"Is he joining school too?" Venerable Drona asked.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Go, join Kripa in that group there."

I said nothing. I did not feel like giving him even a *namaskara*. As I walked by, I turned and glanced at Arjuna. He was staring fixedly, in surprise, at my flesh-ear-rings.

We approached Kripa's group. Kripa was the brother of Drona's wife. Many youths were practising bowcraft under his watchful eye. For a moment it struck me—how silly of this horde of young princes to show off everywhere! Did even one of them have Duryodhana's impressive personality? Did a single one of them have the magnificent gait of Duryodhana? Which mother's son was there among them with the piercing gaze of Duryodhana? I saw Prince Duryodhana coming while these thoughts ran through my mind. If I went to him, he would certainly enquire about my welfare—so I approached him. But he wasn't Prince Duryodhana. He looked very much like Duryodhana. One couldn't tell who was who, just as one can't tell one cygnet from another. Who could it be, I wondered. His dress indicated a prince. But which prince? Kaurava or Pandava? Because he looked almost Duryodhana's double, he had to be a Kaurava. But which Kaurava? Kripa called out, "Duhshasana!" He hurried towards Kripa. So this was Duhshasana. Ah, what a close resemblance between him and Duryodhana. You could substitute one for the other! Prince Duryodhana and Prince Duhshasana. The same majestic gait, the same intense gaze.... Could it be that Duhshasana was Duryodhana's own shadow?

17

For the first fifteen days I did nothing except get acquainted with the war-weapons of the arena The fact was that I was in no mood to learn anything Guru Drona's embarrassing behaviour towards me the very first day had completely disenchanted me There were times I wondered which was better—should I continue to rot in this princes' rubbish heap as a charioteer's son or should I return to Champanagari? What use was military skill to me? What great war was in the offing anyway? And if there was one, so what?—I had no place in it, except as a charioteer What use was war-training to a charioteer? A charioteer had to know about horses, and how to use the various aids to tame their irrepressible natures Couldn't I pick all that up in Champanagari itself? But the very next moment I thought *No, this won't do* Military skill is not for the battlefield only The strong-armed man is always considered superior This military training would impart strength in me I would show Prince Arjuna he wasn t the one and only expert archer in the world But, come to think of it, that poor man hadn't harmed me in any way Why this rivalry with him? Envy blinds a man It's not his fault if Guru Drona loves him Like me, he's just another young man Which pupil doesn't want to be loved by his guru? And surely there's no guru who can love a pupil so much without first assessing his faults and virtues? If that is so, then I, Gurudeva, will prove to be pure gold on your touchstone If you can love Arjuna so much merely because he's a good archer, then I will become an even better archer But what use will it be—my becoming such an expert archer? You'll never take me to your heart You'll never caress my back lovingly—because I am a charioteer's son, and Arjuna after all is a Kshatriya's son What's so special about being a Kshatriya? Why this discrimination on a caste basis? What was the need for it? But I couldn't say this out openly The caste whose ancestors by their valour destroyed their enemies and spread the fame of the Kuru caste and the Kuru kingdom—surely there must be something special about that caste My caste's ancestors, generation after generation, scrubbed horses and held reins How could you compare them with Kshatriyas? Really, wouldn't it have been wonderful if I had been born in a royal Kshatriya family! But how could that ever happen? Banyan crows should not aspire to become palace pigeons No use, let it be One shouldn't get so worked up about

what one cannot change And no point misunderstanding things and harbouring ill will towards others If Arjuna was such a favourite of his guru, that was something for his brothers to feel envious about perhaps—how did I come into the picture? How was I related to Arjuna? No relation at all I was a charioteer's son He was a prince His way was different from mine Both of us travelled on two very different roads of life Very well, Prince Arjuna! Become the best! Be the invincible archer! If need arose, Karna the charioteer's son will be glad to hold your chariot's reins I had made up my mind I was not going to be jealous of Arjuna or of anyone else My way was very different from those of all the other princes here Our births decided that I would learn bowcraft because I wanted to I also wanted to shoot arrows by sound, and to release countless arrows simultaneously in ten directions As for having a guru—what did it matter? What mattered was a pupil's desire to learn I would be firm in body and mind I would learn for learning's sake The vow I took was irreversible

18

My routine for military training was drawn up In a month's time I became familiar with spears, crowbars, arrows, daggers, fire-guns, swords, *pattishas*, *bhushundis*, maces, whirling discs and many other weapons Because I was more interested in bowcraft, I practised archery and bow-related weapons in greater detail Arrows by themselves comprised innumerable types The *karni*-shaft had two sharp heads, which dragged out the intestines when it gored the stomach The *nalika*-shaft's large width was studded with angled teeth which shredded the veins when it was pulled out of the body The deadly *lipta*-shaft's front part was smeared with poisonous grease The *bastika*-shaft's head remained embedded in the body, only the shaft could be pulled out The *suchi* shaft's conical needle-head was perfect for even the smallest and thinnest of targets, such as the pupil of the eye The *jihma*-shaft slithered like a snake but penetrated clean into its victim Apart from these there were bull-boned, elephant-boned, black, foul smelling, sheldrake-feathered, gold-feathered, iron-tipped, horse-boned, rock-hard, numbing, serpent-faced and various other arrows I was ready to dedicate all my energies to learn how to shoot these arrows at a target Each second of my pupilship was to be spent in this pursuit

Previously I had three loves in my life Ganga-mata, the god Surya, and the affection-loaded silver casket gifted by Radha-mata But one more love was added when I entered the military academy archery

19

Father had been an excellent charioteer to the Maharaja for many years But old age now prevented him for being as alert as he was earlier To assist him, the Maharaja had engaged, as his personal help, the skilful son of the charioteer Guvalgana The monarch would sometimes summon him, and I discovered his name was Sanjaya He was older, so I addressed him as Uncle Sanjaya On his countenance and on Vidura's there was an expression of great calm I was much taken by his name Sanjaya Even more than that I liked his being a charioteer I would look out for any odd chance to meet and talk to him

In the chariot yards father and he would talk about the most fascinating topics the best breed of horses, the most effective axle grease, the toughest wood for wheels, the optimum number of spokes for maximum efficiency, how the spokes affect the vehicle's speed, and so on He was always telling me, "Karna, you are a charioteer's son Remember that the best horses never sit on the ground, not even when they sleep at night And the best charioteer never leaves his chariot-seat, not even at the risk of his life Once seated, he's always seated "

"The things you say, Kaka! A horse—and he never sits on the ground!" I exclaimed in surprise

"Yes Not just that—but if a horse that's standing and sleeping raises a hoof and tries to sleep on three legs—you can rest assured he's useless for long journeys Remember a horse is the finest of beasts "

'Finest?" I casually asked, because I wanted him to carry on expatiating His voice, sweet as a *bharadvaja* bird's, was so mellifluous that I could listen to him forever

"Finest—and the most intelligent Karna, if you ever ride into a thick forest and lose your way, just let go of the horse's reins, and this intelligent beast will find the way back for you from where you started " I would get all kinds of horse lore like this in the course of Kaka's talks

How happily time passed listening to his accounts of the variety of equestrian behaviour, diseases, and gaits He gave me detailed information on the dharma-based duties and responsibilities of the charioteer's profession, and the rules of the arena He instructed me on which herbs were medicinal for the special afflictions that affected horses' hooves, by actually treating disease stricken horses

Sanjaya-Kaka was the chief of the palace charioteers Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Grandsire Bhishma, the chief courtier Vidura, the Queen Mother and the minister Vrishavarman—all respected him Uncle Sanjaya, admired by such eminences, actually spent hours chatting with me, and advising me on the niceties of charioteering Sometimes he would take me and Shon on drives in the capital in his splendidly flower-and-bell decorated chariot

20

One day Shon and I went for a stroll in the city On our way back, near the palace, we noticed a royal chariot approaching, with shiny flickering drapes on all four sides Impressed by the whiteness of the five powerful pure-white horses pulling the chariot, I gazed, entranced One of them occasionally threw his head back The chariot raced smoothly ahead

Suddenly Shon let go of my hand and ran towards the chariot Why was he rushing like a madman?—I had no idea In no time at all he reached the chariot It made me angry to see him behave so foolishly He'll be under the wheels before I can reach him! What to do? My hair stood on end with fear If he didn't move out of the chariot's way in a flash, it would be all over—he would be crushed under the wheels I gathered all my energies and yelled, "Shon! Stop!" Swiftly he bent low and picked up a black object The charioteer saw him and dexterously stopped the horses With great difficulty the chariot clattered to a halt near Shon Flecks of foam from the mouth of one of the horses dripped on Shon's head But his mind was elsewhere He was softly caressing the black object in his hand Panting, I came near him He showed me the object, saying distressedly, "Bhaiya! See! It was about to get run over " It was a kitten small eyes blinking, it began whimpering I didn't know what to say to Shon I couldn't fume at him I gazed at him in astonish ment Was this the same Shon who came running behind our chariot when we were leaving?

He ran his hand lovingly on the kitten's back, as ecstatic as if he had gained heaven His upper garment had fallen on the ground he didn't even notice it The mother cat turned up, mewing shrilly, searching for the kitten Still mewing, she lolled near our feet I asked Shon to place the kitten on the ground

No sooner had he done this than she picked up the kitten by its nape in her mouth, and disappeared Who knows where she had been loitering, after losing her kitten? If Shon hadn't shown such courage, was there any doubt at all that her little one would be lying squashed and dead in the dust of the royal road? Who would have listened to her piteous mewing then?

The incident reminded me of Radha-mata Her loving presence stood in front of my eyes How dotingly she had looked after me! A mother should always be like Radha-mata I was lost in memories of Champanagari The charioteer spoke up from his chariot-seat, 'Hurry up! Get out of the way! Quick! The Queen Mother Kunti-devi is in the chariot!'

The Queen Mother Kunti devi!

I grabbed Shon's arm and jerked him away The chariot clattered off in a swirl of dust I gazed longingly again at its beautiful pure white horses I was puzzled Though meant for six, the chariot had only five horses yoked to it Why had one been left out?

I thought *Is there a shortage of horses in the palace?* The chariot disappeared Shon's upper garment had been trampled under its wheels He picked it up, dusted it, and draped it around his shoulders We proceeded to our guest room I placed my arm around Shon's shoulder—something I had never done before

21

My days in Hastinapura passed happily In the beginning I used to miss Champanagari all the time Slowly, however, without any reason, though, I stopped missing my home But the casket in my possession always brought mother's love-filled face back to me Because she was so far away, I realised how deeply precious she was Before dropping off each night, I would say to myself *Mother, lives tied to each other by bonds of love remain close no matter how far apart they are You are indeed in this casket No, you are in two caskets one, this, which you gave me, and the other, my heart*

Memories are like cyclonic storms They spring out of nowhere

and go when and where they please Not just that they sometimes wreak havoc in the peaceful waters of the mind There were times when Champanagari came to me as a piercing memory, then I would feel low, nothing could please me At such times I would take Shon out, and we would go for a stroll in the city My depression would fade We had become familiar with the city as a result of these frequent outings Which roads led where, which deity presided in which temple, where the lakes were, the stables, the granaries, the armouries Hastinapura appeared to us like a garden blooming with varied flowers of all shapes and colours How many different people lived in this city! Singers, dancers, warriors, traders, farmers, artists, pandits and, apart from these, leather craftsmen, potters, sweepers and other workers Go any time, and the city was chockful of crowds I never tired of this teeming city In fact, many a time I thought of playing truant and, instead of going to the military academy, go on a city sightseeing spree But this was not possible I had come here to study, not to indulge

22

My routine in Hastinapura was fixed Every day I woke up at crack of dawn, the auspicious "time of Brahma", and proceeded as required to the Ganga To forestall any objections, I never went to the river ghat I had selected a different spot for myself—a clean and serene corner—where there was no chance of anyone's interfering There I would dip to my heart's content, and then stand waist-deep in the water Shoals of small fish would fleet by and try to nip my ankles—but I knew they would fail Frustrated by my impenetrable skin, they would tire and swim away Finally they stopped coming at me altogether What must they have surmised?—that my legs were two familiar blocks of stone?

I cupped water in my hollowed palm and waited to offer *anjali* to the Sun As he lifted his head in slow scarlet splendour on the distant waters of the Ganga, it looked as if the countless red waves of the river were dancing with a golden veil over their heads A stray flamingo circled between us sporadically, blocking the intensity of the Sun's radiance wherever it moved I thought *Even this small creature has some power it tries to hide the Sun with its presence* As the bird flew away, the Sun glowed again with full resplendence

I offered *arghya* to the flaming orb, saying, "Your disciple, Karna the son of a charioteer, seeks your blessing Favour me, Gurudeva " Then, unblinkingly gazing at the Sun, I could see countless radiant molecules glittering in its rays—molecules revolving at incredible speeds, radiant molecules that dispelled the darkness of the world, eternally speeding molecules that inspired thousands of streams of energy and enterprise What would happen if these molecules failed to appear even for a single day? This Hastinapura, these palaces and temples, these strutting warriors—Arjuna too, and Bhima and Drona—what would happen to them? Ah, they were such committed workers, these dazzling bursts of energy I thought· *If I, Karna could become just one of those marvellous energy-particles, how splendid! Then I could blaze myself into a flaming sacrifice and remove the darkness of the universe!* But that was not possible

I lost myself in these thoughts I was aware of nothing not my body-armour, not my flesh-ear-rings With wide-open eyes I drank in the energy of the Sun But no amount of drinking satisfied me

Hours passed like this The Radiance passed over my head and was now at my back It was not possible to see it any more My neck was tired I closed my eyes in peace And then the vibrations of the Radiance again swam in front of my vision I felt each drop of my blood vibrating like the Radiance After a long time I opened my eyes My back was aglow with intense heat The sands were heated too I stepped quickly out of the water, changed, and strode towards the palace

23

Immediately on reaching the palace, I would slip into my trainee's uniform and, taking Shon with me, walk up to the arena Our day passed practising the uses of different war weapons Sometimes, circling and whirling the mace, sometimes, brandishing the sword, sometimes, hurling the spear No resting until I had picked up expertly all there was to learn about whatever weapon came to my hand I spent hours of *tapasya* just to grasp the science of bowcraft Learning is like a plant fed with the fertiliser of dedication and watered with single-minded effort, it thrives With

out them, more likely than not it wastes away I would pass the whole day with only one end in mind: unremitting effort and dedication My desire was to start with what was the most difficult to learn—and learn it I did In the evening, after Guru Drona dismissed us, all of us laid down our weapons and wended our way back to our homes I instructed Shon to stay back while I hurried to the bank of the Ganga The Ganga flowed behind the military academy in its course towards the city I stood there and gazed westwards, worshipping the Sun-God as he took leave of Hastinapura Stroking his golden fingers on my body, he seemed to whisper, "We will meet again, tomorrow " And all the accumulated tiredness of war-craft, practised during the day, vanished in an instant

At night sleep would come to me in a flash as a result of the day's labours But there were times when sleep behaved like a sulking child and refused to come Then I recalled Guru Drona's words "How will he ever be able to study with princes?" I tried to make my mind understand—there's nothing wrong in his pronouncement—we are not princes—we can't study with princes But my mind refused to accept this truth I tossed, restless I was surprised by my own agitation There were countless boys in the city who were unable to get training with the princes They came to the military academy, all of them Did they brood about it, as I did? Why was I the only one to get so upset? Distressed, I came out, and sat near a lake in front of the palace The reflected sky shimmered in its clear waters The orb of the moon left her frolicking with the feelingless stars and eager to play with the frisking fish in the lake silently descended the sky-stairs and settled on the waters And the unfearing fish played enchanting hide-and-seek with the moon I stayed there a long time, watching the flickering run-and fun of the fish In the crevices of the fence round the lake were flocks of pigeons Without warning, a couple of pigeons cooed, then suddenly fell silent Gazing at the radiant moon-circle I climbed the stairs, went to my room, and dropped off to sleep

24

The military academy was quite some distance from the palace, for which reason we preferred after a few days to stay in the academy Our tie with the palace snapped Once a year, during the

[illegible] to the palace, and that only because of Prince Duryodhana's persuasive invitations He and his minister Vrishavarman had helped us considerably Duryodhana had ninety-nine brothers, but he was the only one who ever enquired about my welfare Nor was I specially attracted to any of them What weird names they had! Durmarsha, Durmukha, and so on There was one person I had taken a liking to—Ashvatthaman, Guru Drona's son. How free and easy he was in his ways! So young, yet he spoke with such authority on dharma, the atman, prowess, duty, love, and other subjects I used to spend all my leisure discussing with him. He knew me only as Karna Who I was, where I came from, why I was here—he never probed into these matters And that was why I liked him most of all

One day I asked him casually, "Don't you find your name Ashvatthaman a little strange?"

He burst into child-like laughter and replied, "Yes It is odd, I think so too Do you know what people say when I ask them about my name?"

"Well 'Ashva' means horse, doesn't it? So you're as impressive as a horse, something like that, surely?"

"No They say I neighed like a horse at the time of my birth, so I'm the Horse-Voiced One, Ashvatthaman I don't like the explanation, though How can a baby neigh? How's it possible? To tell you the truth, I like my name, because my father calls me 'Ashu' Only when I'm alone with him, though In front of others, he calls me Ashvatthaman "

I liked the name "Ashu" I liked it a lot

My days passed happily in his company Once he touched my flesh-ear-rings and said, "Karna, your ear-rings grow more and more golden day by day "

He added, "Who's the goldsmith in this city who does such fine gold-leaf work ?"

'How do I know which goldsmith plates my ear-rings for me? If I did, I'd have asked him to make a golden pair for my friend Ashvatthaman as well He's such a good person "

He laughed "No, bhai, your ear-rings are yours If a thief sees a rishi's son like me in a thatched hut with golden ear-rings, he'll steal them ears and all! And then—I'll have neither rings, nor ears!" We burst into uproarious laughter, forgetting everything around us I used to think Guru Drona's son is so guileless, so detached There was no difference between him and Shon But his father is so grave

and serene that one can hardly fathom his mind. Is it that heavy responsibility makes an adult of a person? Or is it that some are just born adult? Like Yudhishthira, for example—always serious. Catch him laughing even by mistake! All the military trainees respected him, though. And as for his brother Arjuna—he's the life and soul of all. Look anywhere, and it's Arjuna. Guru Drona doesn't love even Ashvatthaman as much as he loves Arjuna. But what's behind his great affection for Arjuna? In point of fact, there's no one the equal of Ashvatthaman in the military academy. Yet Arjuna gets all the respect, to the exclusion of all others. Is it right to give so much importance to one individual? Won't he lose his head if he gets such attention? What special test makes Arjuna so favoured of Drona? I had often wanted to question Ashvatthaman about this, but I restrained myself with great effort. He might think I was showing disrespect to his father. And so that question was one I could never be able to put to him. But Ashvatthaman was a friend—and as a friend he was closer to me than all the other trainees.

25

I took time off once to visit mother in Champanagari. On my return eight days later I learnt from Ashvatthaman that Guru Drona had tested all his pupils in my absence. He perched a stuffed bird on a high branch of an *ashoka* tree. Whoever pierced the left eye of the bird would receive his fulsome approbation. He summoned all the pupils, one by one called them to the stone platform, handed each contender a bow, and ordered him to take aim. The pupil strode up, lifted the bow, and strung it, after which Guru Drona asked, "Before you shoot, tell me: what do you see?"

Different contenders gave different replies. Foolish Bhima replied, "I see the green hills in the distance." Someone said he saw clouds, another saw the green leaves of the tree, a third the bird.

Guru Drona wasn't satisfied. He ordered each of these pupils to lay down the bow and go back. Last to come up was Arjuna. The guru asked, "Arjuna, what do you see?"

Arjuna replied, "The bird's eye."

Guru Drona was delighted. He thumped Arjuna's back and said, "Splendid! Shoot and pierce the eye then!" Arjuna fired the arrow and split the eye clean. Another thump on Arjuna's back.

This incident was narrated to me by Ashvatthaman who rolled his large eyes even larger as he recounted the details Suddenly he asked me, "Karna, if you had been present what would you have replied to father?"

I reflected for a while I projected myself in imagination in the shooting posture on the stone platform and fixed my gaze on the eye of the bird, and said, "Ashvatthaman, had I been there, I'd have said,'I see nothing' When there's a target in front of Karna, Karna no longer is Karna His body becomes all arrow, not just arrow, the arrow's tip, and the centre of the target itself I'd have said, 'My arrowy body sees only a tiny dot in front of me' "

Delighted with my answer, Ashvatthaman embraced me He said, "Karna, you'll be the greatest archer yet!" I released myself from his arms, and made up my mind that I would pierce the same target today for which Guru Drona had so extravagantly praised Arjuna If I did so, I would sooner or later get closer to Guru Drona He'd thump my back too

That evening I went to the city, bought a stuffed bird, and returned As soon as silence descended on all sides at night, I woke Shon We emerged from our room I was holding the stuffed bird Total stillness in the war arena Throbbing with the clangour of weapons all day—and dead silent now At different places the *ingudi* filled lamps were glowing, as if imparting confidence to the sombre games stadium I picked up a clay lamp and climbed up the archers' platform In front of me was the *ashoka* tree I pointed to it, and handing the stuffed bird to Shon I said, ' Tie this bird high on that tree and wait there with this clay lamp in your hand "

"Why?" he asked, surprised

"I'll explain later Hurry!"

He took the bird and lamp and went near the tree He scurried up in an instant like a squirrel After some time he said, "Bhaiya, there's a string here tied on a branch Shall I tie it here?"

"Climb as far high up as you can," I shouted from below

He climbed further up till he couldn't go higher He tied the bird to a branch, and himself perched on another branch I shouted, "Hold the lamp so it throws light on the bird Don't shake!" He held the lamp steady I lifted the bow and aimed I had dedicated myself as a pupil of the Sun God on that very platform My mind said to me *Remember, Prince Arjuna pierced one eye of the target—the visible one You'll pierce both—the visible and the one you can't see*

How? The bird will spin the instant the first arrow strikes. The moment it twists round, and the other side is in focus, you'll shoot straight into the second eye. Both arrows are to be fired simultaneously, and in the dim glow of this lamp.

I gazed in the direction of the tree. I guessed the speed and direction of the wind by the flicker of the lamp. From the quiver near me I quickly pulled out two sharp shafts, steadied the bow, fixed both arrows, pulled the string taut.... I was... no longer I. My body, mind, sight, breath—the two tips of the two arrows and the two eyes of the bird—became one. My fingers became absolutely still on the taut string. There were two different sensations on both bow-fingers. The first arrow had to be released a fraction of a second before its twin. A moment's steadiness—then both shafts whizzed towards the target. The first struck—the bird spun—the second hit, and the clumsily-tied bird fell on the ground with a thud. I flung aside the bow, leapt four steps at a time down the platform, and sprinted towards the tree. I took the bird to a corner where a lamp glowed and examined it. Both eyes' pupils were embedded with two arrows. My eyes shone with the joy of success. Shon clambered down the tree. In the distance I heard the night watchman tapping his steel shaft on the ground at the stroke of midnight. We returned to our room and slept.

From that day, when no one was present in the vicinity, we would slip out at night and secretly practise the most complex feats of target-shooting. It was easy to concentrate the energies of the mind on silent, lonely nights. There was none to interrupt or interfere.

Neither Shon nor I realised how many years passed in this routine of practice. Wrestling bouts had toughened my body: Punching my arm muscles, Ashvatthaman would ask me, "Is this flesh or iron?"

26

One day I accompanied Ashvatthaman to the palace. Duryodhana's maternal uncle Shakuni was sitting near the lake opposite the palace, fondling a pure-white swan. I was fascinated by the bird. How majestically he sways his neck as he paddles! As if he is the sole monarch of the watery kingdom! We approached uncle Shakuni. He looked very much like Dhritarashtra. But he had the habit of raising his eyebrows all the time that he talked, with the result that his listener was compelled to look at his thick brows

above his beady eyes Stroking the swan, he asked Ashvatthaman, "Tell me, Ashvatthaman, how are the princes progressing in their military training?"

"Arjuna's expert in bowcraft, Duryodhana in mace-wielding, Bhima in wrestling, Nakula in sword-play, Duhshasana in fist-fight, Sahadeva in chakra-flinging, and Yudhishthira in war-strategy," Ashvatthaman replied

"Time then to test them once soon "

"Yes, sir, that's what father was thinking," Ashvatthaman said

By this time an attendant had turned up with milk in a stone bowl. He placed the bowl near the lake Uncle Shakuni transferred the swan to Ashvatthaman, stopped, scooped water in his cupped hands and trickled it in the bowl

"Mama ji, are you economising on milk?" Ashvatthaman asked

"No This is a royal swan You can pour as much water as you like in this bowl but he won't drink the water,' Shakuni raised his eybrows and said as he wiped his hands on his shawl

'How's that?"

"See for yourself " Shakuni gently took the swan from Ashvatthaman and placed him near the bowl The bird stretched his sinuous neck inside the bowl, and gurglingly sucked the milk Some time passed, he pulled up his neck, and jerked it once, four drops of milk splattered out We peered curiously inside the bowl The scooped-up water was visible inside—just plain, clear water Uncle Shakuni poured it back into the lake, and raised his eyebrows

I was astonished by what I saw Imagination's horses started pulling my mind-chariot Isn't man also like that swan? What he needs, he takes, the rest he leaves Hadn't I done the same thing? With the exceptions of Prince Duryodhana and Ashvatthaman, which other person had I come close to in that huge city? Why couldn't I feel intimate with others? What answer was there to this? How could the swan ever explain the way it separated milk from water? But it was surely no fault of mine Prince Duryodhana affectionately enquired about me, and that was the reason I was drawn towards him Human love is like the earth First, a single seed is sown Then innumerable ears of corn shoot up The same with man one word of love, and he freely responds with a whole flowing Ganga of love That was why I loved Duryodhana Ashvatthaman was simple and guileless I saw no difference between him and Shon And I really knew no one else It wasn't possible to know others either, because I didn't have the time.

Bhima, trapped in the arrogance of his strength, lolled about in the earth of the wrestling pit. Outside the pit, he did nothing but eat. What an uncultured voice he had! He had fruity globular eyes, and he snored like a thunderstorm. As for Prince Yudhishthira, all he could do was carry on discussing for hours with Ashvatthaman about war, politics, duty, and other similar profound subjects. And Nakula and Sahadeva—I didn't even know how they were and what they did. Prince Duryodhana and Duhshasana excepting, all the others appeared to me to be useless parasitical types, like the ubiquitous *amar-bela* weed. What was the point in knowing them? Man should be like the royal swan. What you like, take; leave the rest. This was my view.

Ashvatthaman and I returned from the palace. On the way Ashvatthaman remembered something, and said abruptly, "Karna, I said nothing about you to Shakuni-*mama*."

"He asked you how the princes were progressing, not about all the pupils of the academy."

"But I could have said a lot about you to him."

"Such as? You mean, about these flesh-ear-rings and about my armour, don't you? The whole city knows about that by now."

"No, not that. I could have told him that Arjuna excelled in bowcraft, Duryodhana in the mace, Bhima in wrestling, Nakula in the sword, Duhshasana in boxing, Sahadeva in the chakra, Yudhishthira in military strategy—and Karna in all of these!"

Was he chanting my praises or telling the truth—it was hard to say, love does blind a person, and I was his friend. His very close friend. So it could very well be that he wasn't seeing the truth. So I preferred not to say anything.

27

Six years flew away like a flock of birds, where no one knows. Nothing more was left to learn in war-craft. In fact, the nocturnal practice that Shon and I had done had given us such insights into the use of each and every weapon and into every aspect of war-craft as became known only to the two of us. Besides doing ordinary wrestling, I actually grappled with four wrestlers at a time in the arena. I do not know why, but I never seemed to tire during all these exercises. Indeed, the more I exerted, the more my body seemed to grow hot—so hot sometimes that my wrestling rivals would say,

"Karna, go straight to the Ganga and take a few dips and cool your body—then come and call us to wrestle with you What's this you have—a body or the fierce hot wheels of a chariot?"

They were so terrified of my thorn-grip that the instant I readied myself with it they all pretended to collapse The speciality of this feint is that you immobilise the opponent's neck in a pincer grip The entire energy of the body is concentrated in one's vice-like fist which, by gradually increasing the pressure, suffocates and kills the adversary Simultaneously, the adversary's hands and feet are entwined round one's body in such a manner that, in spite of having the strength to unloose the grip on his neck, he is unable to do anything about it This was my special defensive manoeuvre According to the rules of wrestling, this cruel device was permitted only in the course of a duel And "duel" meant very simply that only one would survive There could be only one outcome victory or death If a contender out of fear of death begged mercy, he was spared But his life after that was no better than that of a widow's In a kingdom of warriors, he wasn't worth a straw I had studiously picked up all feints that might prove useful in duels But my abiding faith was in one feint only—the thorn-grip

28

Many days and nights, many dry and green leaves floated away on the wind of time Every day the same routine rise at crack of dawn, take a holy dip in the Ganga, pray to the Sun-God from early morning till afternoon till my back was sunned thoroughly warm, then in the academy imbibing the theory of spear, sword, pipe-gun, *bhushundi*, scimitar, *pattisha* and other weapons, in the evening going with Shon for target-practice in the dim light of stone-lamps, and last of all fade away to sleep, recalling the events of the day along with nostalgic thoughts of Champanagari Six years passed in this manner No more did little Vasu play in the courtyard of my mind Hastinapura had usurped Champanagari Discipline and valour had replaced curiosity and uncertainty The tiny feet pattering in the sands of the Ganga near Champanagari now fell with heavy thuds on the soil of Hastinapura The python called Time had swallowed six whole years! Six years! If I were to say what happened in these six years—and what did *not* happen—that would make another full story During these six years I was just a student

of a military academy But nobody treated me like a student I was under the general guidance of Acharya Drona in the class of Acharya Kripa In that class were also the other ordinary students of Hastinapura, I being the most ordinary of all In that crush of students, neither Drona nor Kripa had time to talk to me To tell the truth, it never struck me either that I would like to be patted on the back or otherwise enquired about Whenever I faced any special difficulty regarding the use of a weapon, I simply closed my eyes briefly, meditated on my guru—the Sun-God—and in a twinkling all became clear, and I withdrew from the others, as if a *yakshini* had waved a magic wand over me There's an extraordinary power in the devotion known as shraddha Without shraddha for some person or other, no human can live In my studenthood, I reposed shraddha in my guru I hadn't the least idea of what fear was But I did have this occasionally angry feeling—why did neither of my two gurus ever talk to me? Was Karna only a stone puppet to them? I felt like a thirsty creature in the middle of an ocean, unable to drink And if I decided to speak out my feelings, who else but Shon did I have near me to speak to? I felt suffocated If elders pointed out the faults of juniors, that was fine But what if they ignored them? Then the mind choked and like a pushing sprout tried to find some other way out What did I get in these six years? A terrible, unendurable indifference A scalding sense of being abandoned No one even knew there was a boy named Karna in the military academy I wasn't the flatterer type That is how Shon and I created a beautiful spontaneous world of our own in the academy itself Instead of developing respect for Acharya Drona and Acharya Kripa, we felt uneasy with them I started feeling they were gurus only in name How could you have a guru who didn't know his disciple's mind? How could you have a guru who didn't nourish the bud of his disciple's mind with the breath of affection? I thirsted for guru-love Which is why I permitted the hand of *my* guru, the Sun-God, to caress my back until such time as the back grew warm—yes, and till then I continued to offer *arghya*-homage to the Sun-God The continual caressing had heated my back into a smooth hardness

The student princes of the academy were treated very differently The darling of Drona and Kripa was Arjuna That was the reason Duryodhana tried to draw attention to himself—why should Arjuna be the sole beneficiary? It always ended up in squabbling Bhima

resented his brother being teased, and he couldn't control his sharp temper. Biting his lips in anger, he would let fly at anyone within sight. Fear of Drona prevented anyone from informing the Acharya about the quarrels.

Once it so happened that all of them went for an outing in the woods outside the city. While Bhima was sleeping, Duryodhana with the connivance of Duhshasana trussed his hands and feet with creeper-ropes and dumped him in a lake. But Bhima escaped unscathed. It was rumoured that the water gods freed him.

I refused to believe any of this. For one thing, if Bhima had really been flung in the lake in the manner described, there was no chance of his surviving, because who ever heard of water gods? We all knew only huge-jawed fish and vicious crocodiles populated lakes. And the second thing was that as soon as Bhima emerged from the lake, he would immediately get to know of the plot to assassinate him. Who else but Duryodhana could have conspired to do so? And so, the instant he came out, he would have finished off Duryodhana with his mace. For Bhima was not one to check his anger. No amount of persuasion could move him; no amount of consolation pacify him.

Where would anyone get the time to pay attention to the two sons of a charioteer after attending to the quarrels of the princes and noisily eulogising their exploits? Six years passed like this. A sixteen-year old teen-ager became a youth of twentytwo. I wanted to take on every challenging and competitive task.

Youth! The ceaseless throbbing of arteries all aflame! The most priceless gift of Nature to Man! The only royal road of life! The spring of Nature's empire, the outstretched plumes of the peacock-mind, the variegated hood of the blossoming body, the exquisite fragrance of the garden of imagination, the most resplendent steed in the ceaselessly speeding chariot of the world-creator, the head-high confident period of a man's life, the time of achieving, of doing things—*anything*, the time of shakti and swiftness....

Everything connected with childhood is coloured green. Everything associated with youth is rose-pink and orange. The reach of young sight goes beyond the sky-touching horizon. It is sweetly and fluently attracted to whatever is moving and shining. Youth's rhythm naturally makes the impossible possible.

I had started finding some of my childhood and boyhood memories laughable. The Karna who addressed the Ganga as

"Ganga-mata" the Karna who collected in his shawl shells from the shore the Karna who dreamt of soaring in the sky like Garuda the Karna who fulfilled the wishes of his companions by agreeing to act as king and sitting on the stone throne the Karna who admired the shine of his flesh-ear-rings reflected in the waters of the Ganga!—how self-deceiving all this delight! Such blind shraddha! Such doubts, such ignorance!

Everything became blurred, shattered by Time's assault Youth's charioteer now gripped the reins of life's chariot A five-horsed chariot effort, desire for glory, fearlessness, pride, compassionate involvement

Youth means dynamism Can light ever be dark? Only youthful dynamism inspires and adds to people's dignified aspirations

Desire for glory is the sole stable attribute of youth I'll be famous! I'll take what is—and bend it underfoot! This thought alone is what makes a young man rise in life

Fearlessness is the highest note in the rhythmic scale of youth Fear is when this note is broken and out of tune Can sounds from a cracked bamboo flute ever please anyone? The world longs for the high note, not the cracked

Pride is the very soul of youth A man without principles is no man, and a youth without pride is no youth A young man always prides himself on his principles, and will become a martyr for them if the need arises

Compassionate involvement is youth's ornament A constant readiness to use strength to protect the weak A priceless dedication to live oneself—and to let others live also

Such is youth Where you have this, you'll see youth chafing under insult, you'll see a person roused to anger in order to redress injustice, you'll see a person uprooting all forms of exploitation you'll see the true face of victory Where this is, is light If light is absent, darkness is present The darkness that embraces insult, the darkness that confuses the poison of defeat with the nectar of victory, the darkness that glorifies injustice, the darkness that fears attack

29

The affection I had for Ashvatthaman had by now turned into an intense abiding love In the whole of Hastinapura I had found a friend at last, dear as life itself

Once we were sitting on the bank of the Ganga, chatting. Very casually he asked, "Karna, the reason I like you is not just that you are so good-natured, but that you are so good-looking."

"Am I really all that handsome?"

"Yes. It's something I'm sure you don't even dream of, but every day when you return from your bath in the Ganga when the Sun is at its peak, that's the time when the ladies of the city leave all their social norms on the shelf and find one reason or another to open their windows to have a glimpse of you."

"Do you know what you are saying, Ashvatthaman? If what you say is true, I'll have to find another path to the Ganga from tomorrow."

"It's true, Karna. Strong, bull-like shoulders, cheeks like pink *gurhal* flowers, the bluish shadows of your flesh-ear-rings falling on your cheeks, nose straight and pointed like a dagger, eyebrows curved and beautiful like a bow-frame, eyes dark-blue like a *kateri* blossom, fore-head broad as a *thali*, long golden curly hair, shaming even a maharaja's gold crown as it falls on your neck and shoulders, sinews as tough as the sides of a chariot—with such divine qualities why shouldn't anyone find you attractive?"

"Ashvatthaman, I know for certain that if I tell you the truth, you won't get angry."

"Tell me, Karna."

"Why is it your father didn't find any of these qualities attractive? In these six years did it ever occur to him and his darling Arjuna who Karna is, where he is?"

"What you say is right, Karna. But you are not alone in this. The Nishadha king Hiranyadhanu's son Ekalavya gets the same treatment—and he has come all the way hundreds of *yojanas* from the Nishadha hills to learn the science of weapons. At least I am here to listen to you unburdening your mind. Think what Ekalavya must be thinking of my father! I can't even imagine it. I don't know why father behaves in this atrocious manner. Not all sons get to know what goes on in their fathers' innermost minds."

His explanation was simple and true, and it appealed to me greatly. How would I ever know what went on in my father Adhiratha's mind? Ashvatthaman reminded me of Ekalavya, and a mysterious respect for the unseen but similarly suffering Ekalavya was born in my mind.

30

One day Ashvatthaman and I were standing near the sword-fencing arena. The arena had a boundary on all four sides consisting of massive crowbars. Someone had twisted one of the crowbars till its tip touched the ground. As a result of just one of the crowbars getting bent, the entire pattern looked awry. I put my hand to it in an attempt to straighten it. Ashvatthaman said quickly, "Let it be, Karna. They've all tried. In a fit of anger, Bhima once bent it the way it is now. No one's been able to twist it back into shape again. Only Bhima can do that."

"I see. You want me to straighten it?" I asked, looking into his eyes.

"Even you can't do it."

"*Achcha*?" I removed my footwear and placed them on one side. Tying my shawl round my waist, I said, "I'll straighten this bar with my left hand and bring it back to exactly where it was earlier. Watch me!"

I approached the crowbar, looked up at the sky, where my Guru-deva shone brightly. Concentrating all my energy in my left arm, I closed my eyes, and jerked the bar with all the strength I could summon. The first jerk brought it up to my waist level. Fitting the raised part to my shoulder, and gripping it in my left hand, I slowly twisted it perfectly upright to the earlier symmetry. Ashvatthaman gaped. He placed his hand on my back to pat me. But then he instinctively removed it.

"What's wrong, Ashvatthaman?" I asked, surprised.

"*Arre*, your body is flaming hot!" he replied, giving me a piercing look.

It's very likely Bhima got to see the straightened crowbar some time or other. Every day he would twist one crowbar out of shape. And I made it a point each night to straighten it with my left hand.

31

At the end of each year a massive *yajna* was performed at the military academy. Guru Drona had established a peculiar practice. Every student of the academy had to bring a live animal from the forest as a sacrificial offering at the *yajna*. When questioned about the practice, he had replied that it was conducive to self-reliance and courage.

At one of the annual *yajnas* an unforgettable incident took place. We had all started for the forest in order to bring back a live beast. At the commencement of the forest we fanned out in various directions I chose the east As I was walking, it occurred to me I had already earlier offered a deer, an antelope, a wild boar, and other creatures This year I wanted to offer a more ferocious beast Which could that be? Elephant? *Chhee!* An ugly, grossly heavy wood smashing creature like that? Horse? No, sir, a horse can be caught, but it will take at least two or more days to do so By that time the *yajna* would be over Which then? Spotted deer, wolf? *Chhee!* Which is the most formidable creature of all? The tiger! That's it, it will be a tiger this year! I'd have to go into deep forest though That was no trouble Go I would I made up my mind even as I crossed the edge of the forest

With long strides and keen glances on all four sides, I moved ahead I roamed all day in the dense forest, spotted many animals but never a tiger My wanderings had brought on an intense thirst for water Evening was about to fall. Birds were returning to their nests Wiping the sweat off my face, I came to the river called Bahuda I stood there, and paid homage to the Sun-God, thinking *Your disciple's efforts have been all in vain today*

I sat down on a black rock and scooped up water in my palms I was about to sip when a fierce, hulking beast pounced at me from behind I lost balance and fell in the Bahuda's waters The beast leapt in after me The waters frothed I looked at the animal A black-and white spotted cheetah! It had come to the ghat in the evening to slake its thirst Face round like a pumpkin, eyes red like *gunja* berries

My eyes shone in delight I was not aware that I was in the river—that my clothes were drenched He raised his paw to strike me I grabbed the paw in mid-air and literally dragged him out of the water But the cheetah seemed to become even more agitated on land He jerked his paw free The impact of the water and the resistance I provided aggravated his violence Fire flashed from his angry eyes Growling fiercely, he kept attacking me repeatedly At times he leapt five or six lengths in the air, licking his blood-red tongue greedily as if to lap my blood Mouth ajar, he jumped at me I retaliated I defended myself well for may be half an hour, but it was a losing battle I glanced at my body That vicious beast must have clawed at me a hundred times, but there wasn't the faintest

trace of nail-marks or sharp teeth on my body. My skin was impenetrable. He was only *one*—even ten cheetahs could not have devoured me, not even in my sleep. A lightning-current whizzed through my body. Instantaneously, my flesh seemed to blaze up like a whirring chariot-wheel. My body is impenetrable!—the very thought of this made my body glow like a spark. Suddenly I lashed out and punched the cruel creature on his face. He backed away in agony. This was my cue to launch a full-scale attack, one blow after another. With a tightly closed fist I pummelled his back, belly, neck—wherever I could. Getting even more violent, he struck back. An hour passed in this duelling. In the end it was he who tired. Not one drop of my blood had wet his tongue. The horribly-growling cheetah now started whining. Fear made him tuck his tail between his legs. I mounted his chest. The grass, fifteen to twenty arm's-lengths all around us, was flattened and badly crushed. From a nearby bush I felt a wild creeper on my legs. I pulled it towards me. A swift hard tug, and fifteen arm's-lengths of creeper, uprooted, came in my grip. I trussed the front and hind legs of the cheetah with the creeper, making a black-and-white bundle of flesh-and-bone.

Darkness was falling. Lugging that huge beast on my shoulder, I made my way back to town in the soft light of the moon. It was midnight by the time I reached. A biting cold wind numbed my body. I had forgotten to retrieve my shawl from the Bahuda. My wet garments were filthy with dust. The town was deep in sleep. Only the cheetah's growls, like thunder clouds reverberating, could be heard. I reached the military academy. The animals that had been captured by the other students after searching in forest after forest had been incarcerated in a single wooden enclosure. I flung in their midst the cheetah on my shoulder whose whiskers had been tickling my neck all this while. The animals all screamed in terror. I hurried to my room, changed, and went off to sleep.

At dawn the *yajna* ceremony began in accordance with approved custom. Finally came the time for the sacrifice to be offered at the altar. A student entred the enclosure, and dashed back in consternation to the *yajna* platform. He said to Guru Drona, "Gurudeva, someone's brought a cheetah for the sacrifice!"

"Cheetah! Let's go and have a look." His white eyebrows rose in surprise. We followed Guru Drona to the covered enclosure. I was hoping that Guru Drona, after seeing the cheetah, would make enquiries and pat me on the back. But he merely creased his

forehead and said, 'Why has this cheetah been brought here?*Arre*, a *yajna* is performed for peace of mind It is forbidden to sacrifice a cheetah at a *yajna* Set him free "

But none dared step forward to free the cheetah Finally Bhima volunteered He unknotted the creepers I had tied The cheetah was in a state of fear He took a mighty leap over the boundary and vanished in a trice

My hopes were dashed to smithereens I felt the pain, of course, but the truth is that I was disgusted with the glimpse of life that Guru Drona's despicable behaviour gave me Why shouldn't cruel and predatory animals be sacrificed in a *yajna*? Instead of harmless goats animals like cheetahs deserved to be the sacrificial victims

32

Many days passed From the time I came to Hastinapura, I had gone back only once to Champanagari, and that was during the time when Guru Drona was testing his disciples Five years had elapsed since then Much as I wanted to, I wasn't able to visit Champanagari even once during those years—for I had come as a student, to study, wasn t it?

It was my good luck that my guru happened to be so excellent a guru of gurus, indeed My guru was the Sun God himself Surya Deva Standing on the stone platform of Hastinapura's arena, I had made up my mind to become his disciple He in turn treated me as a beloved pupil For six years he introduced me to the secrets of the most esoteric mysteries I can t say what language he taught me in, but whatever he taught, I learnt fast There was nothing he did not teach me The most difficult feats of archery, the complicated holds of hand to hand duels the ways in which to master the ungovernable natures of horses, elephants and camels His advice was always whispered into my ear in tacit communication, the language of silence

Every morning, opening the petals of countless buds with his soft rays he would tell me, ' Karna, learn from this granting to anyone with an open heart whatever he asks for, you must make the lives of all who come in touch with you bloom like a flower "

How great was my guru! Was there ever a guru in this world who gave to his pupil so liberally such lucid advice in such simple ways? It was now time to go at least once to Champanagari and wash my

guru's feet with the pure water of the Ganga. I did not call her Ganga-mata any more, but simply Ganga, because my childhood devotion had been hardened by the stony ways of routine socialising. There is always only one mother—she who gives birth and rears the baby. A river is a river, after all. How can a river be a mother? My mother was Radha-mata. And I had not met her for a long time. What would she think when she saw me? I had no doubt whatever that her first words to me would be, "You look so pulled down, *re* Vasu. I hope you didn't bathe in the Ganga's waters, did you?" It doesn't matter how old a boy grows; in his mother's eyes, he is always a child. A mother is the only person in the world who does not see love in terms of etiquette and measurable behaviour. She only knows how to love her son as he should be loved.

I called Shon and said, "Shon, get ready to leave. We're going to Champanagari tomorrow." His face lit up with joy. We had become as tall and strong as sal-trees—and we were returning home to Champanagari for the first time! Our place of birth!

33

Next day we left Hastinapura. It was a long journey, so we rode two excellent white horses. By this time we had become good horsemen. Among animals, I always preferred the horse. The horse never sits; it bends a hoof and sleeps standing. I had studied the equestrian nature carefully. I knew perfectly how to tame even the most recalcitrant horse. Besides, horses were our family occupation for generations. Uncle Sanjaya had said, "Every man should excel in his profession"—and how could I ignore his advice?

We crossed the city limits of Hastinapura. It was spring: multi-coloured flowers graced the countryside, *bava*-trees were clustered with tiny yellow blossoms, catechu trees glowing with light red flowers, *anjani*-trees with blue. The flame-of-the-forest seemed to be blazing with anger seeing the bounty bestowed by Goddess Nature on all these trees: his entire body flamed with blood-red blossoms. It shone in exceptional solitary glory.

A mixed sweet fragrance floated from the flowers into the atmosphere. The eagle, the sheldrake, the *bharadvaja*, the koel, the pigeon—these and other birds congregated during this season. Each sang its melody in the exquisite fifth note. Spring! Spring means—the colourful apotheosis of Mother Nature. Spring

means—the seven musical notes holding hands and playing *kabaddi* Spring means—a lovely strand of the earthly vesture of Mother Nature caught in the trap of time Spring is the anklet dropped from the pitter-pattering feet of giggling Lady Monsoon when the continuous soft fingers of mischievous rain tickle her. What's the use? There's no way Spring can be described Spring is Spring

Our journey continued amidst all these lovely scenes of Mother Nature At nightfall, we would halt and rest near a city Eight days passed in this fashion Crossing many rivers and mountains, we arrived in Prayag on the ninth day Prayag where Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvati unite! Champanagari was only twentyfive *yojanas* away

Eager to see the confluence of the three rivers, we swerved our horses towards the *sangam* as soon as we entered the town It was evening when we arrived The Yamuna's waters were flowing from Mathura, the Ganga's from Kampilya, and the Sarasvati was swiftly streaming in from Ayodhya Three clear streams were visible, in distinct separation the pure-white waters of the Ganga, the darker shade of the Yamuna, and the reddish tint of the Sarasvati Three different personalities, yet they flowed hand-in-hand to mingle in the ocean, united from there on under one enchanting name—Ganga Seeing that three-braided confluence known as the Triveni, a strange thought occurred to me How did Nature forget to teach man the lesson she taught the three rivers so well? Why does man practise so many contraries of caste and false ideas of high and low? Which ocean will *these* streams mingle in? What else can come out of separation and conflict except destruction? Why not man walk hand-in-hand with man, in a spirit of mutual understanding, uniting all varied streams in one flow? But that of course was wishful thinking, because rivers are rivers, and human beings are human beings Man is perhaps the only animal in the world whose folly makes him dig his own doom

From the commingled waters of the three rivers I scooped an *anjali* and offered thanksgiving to the Sun-God, saying, "Deva, grant me the patient fortitude of these three rivers Grant me the wisdom to understand others well Let no selfish thoughts touch my mind "

Our horses drank their fill, and we returned to the town We walked back, holding the reins Some women were also returning to

the town, carrying water. I was walking with my eyes fixed westwards. Suddenly Shon's horse nuzzled the neck of one of the returning women. The cold sensation upset her. She screamed and dropped the water pot from her head. It shattered near my feet and drenched my dress. She was frightened, and her fear increased when she looked at me. She fluttered her eyes. I was fascinated. She scratched the ground with her toe and stood still with bowed head. The water had drenched her body too, and her wet dress clung to her in places. The breeze from the rivers' confluence gently swayed a few stray curls; the rest of her hair was wet and seemed stuck on her face. Her complexion was yellow like the pandanus flower. This was the first time I had set eyes on such a lovely lady. She stood there, constricting her limbs, like a bird in her nest huddling her feathers in a storm.

I was about to speak to Shon when one of her companions stepped forward and, bowing, said, "Maharaj, forgive us. She's so careless! You're all wet."

"Who told you I'm a 'Maharaj'? I'm Karna. Your pot was broken because of my brother—Shon's—carelessness. I'm the one who should ask forgiveness," I said.

"No.... But you do look like a Maharaj." she said agitatedly.

"No. I'm Karna, the charioteer's son, the eldest son of Champanagari's Adhiratha."

"Charioteer's son? Well, she's a charioteer's daughter in that case," she said, pulling the lovely girl by the arm.

"Charioteer's daughter?" I asked, surprised, because how could such beauty grace a charioteer-family?

"Yes, sir. She's Vrishali, sister of Satyasena, Prayag's most renowned charioteer."

I glanced at her. She had not even lifted up her face yet. What could a twenty-four year old military trainee boor like me know or say about the beauty of woman? But seeing her I could say this much—that woman was certainly the first soft gently-released exhalation from the mouth of the world-maker Vishvakarma in his first sweet happy slumber.

It looked as if the Sun-God had spattered a flaming pink pot all over the sky. Why was he so joyous? I gazed at the liberal splash of pink and said to Shon, "Let's go, Shon. It's getting late."

Before leaving, I picked up a shard of the shattered pot to take with me for no reason other than that I just felt like it.

34

Our horses entered the town limits of Champanagari the next day The massive rock-plateau came in view Seeing it, ant-memories began scurrying in my mind's attic Six years ago I had clashed with an infuriated bull on this very plateau, and I had fainted I had such confidence now in my strength that, if a bull were to confront me, I knew that I, through sheer muscle-power, could immobilise it

We arrived at the door of Parnakuti Hearing the clip-clop of horses' hooves, Radha-mata came out Seeing us, her lotus face blossomed, as it were She burst into a flurry of activity She rushed in and emerged with a heap of smouldering embers on a platter. From the threshold I asked her, "When I left you gave me a silver casket Why these embers now?"

Without a word she threw a fistful of red chillies in the embers, and circled the platter ritually in front of our faces The acrid smell of the chillies sent Shon into a paroxysm of coughing She went out with the platter and emptied it at a far distance After five years I was back in my Parnakuti—as I stepped inside my head banged against the lintel

"How tall you've become, *re* Karna!" Radha-mata exclaimed in astonishment

"Uh-huh, not Karna—Vasu," I said as I touched her feet. She swiftly raised me and clasped me to her breast, toying with my flesh-ear-rings Tears welled up in her eyes Wiping her eyes with the end of her garment, she came out with, "You didn't bathe in the waters of the Ganga, did you?"

"Ask what you want from Shon, he'll tell you," I said, and touched her feet with my head She was the solitary Prayag-pilgrimage of my life, she was my Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati. And my temple was Parnakuti, my thatched hut

35

After fifteen days in Parnakuti we returned to Hastinapura No sign of even a bird in the military academy Total silence everywhere, everything looking desolate There should have been the clash and clangour of weapons—why this desolation? Could it be that some inauspicious incident had occurred in the capital? The

tortoise-neck of suspicion raised its head repeatedly. We tethered our horses in the academy. It struck me that the answer to this mysterious desolation could be found only by going to the palace. I saw Ashvatthaman emerging from the main door. I asked my first question as soon as he came within range. "Why all this desolation in the academy, Ashvatthaman?"

"All the warriors have gone out of the city," he replied.

"Why?"

"To construct a competition arena."

"Competition? What kind?"

"Between the warriors. With all kinds of weapons. The final test of our training. The winner gets acclaimed as the hero of Hastinapura. The Queen Mother will put a tilak on his forehead, and the citizens will take out a procession of elephants in his honour."

"When will these combats take place?" I asked eagerly.

"In the full moon of spring, Vasanta-Purnima. The minister Vrishavarman has sent out invitations today to all the rajas. The arena of the academy is too small, so they're building a commodious arena outside the city. They've been working at it for the last fifteen days, non-stop, day and night."

A competition! Eight days away! The final test of merit and demerit! A competition to assess true strength and weakness. Fine. Now Hastinapura will find out who excels in which skill. Now finally the pot of fame of Drona's pet pupil Arjuna will shatter once and for all. Guru Drona is not the only person in this world. The unbiased judge of the competition will give talent its due.

Beater-of-his-own-drum Arjuna! Now you'll see how flimsy is the popularity on which you have been standing. You mushroom because you flourish in Drona's shadow; now you'll see that my guru is infinitely superior to yours. My mind began spinning a web of possibilities. The black thread of what had happened in the military academy obsessed me.

Such contests are essential. Those eight days seemed to me like eight yugas. Arjuna had blocked my progress for six years—not just mine, but everyone else's. Naturally, Guru Drona had no time to attend to anyone else's development. Not one—not two—but for six years he had shrivelled the tiny seeds of my hopes in the fire of his indifference. Anyone else in my position would have left Hastinapura and left all that nourished his ego and walked off in

disgust It was with the greatest difficulty that I had kept my fury in abeyance for so long I knew that in this world beggars can't be choosers But I will show all the gurus and pupils who ignored me that there *was* somebody in Hastinapura—a very much live and breathing man named Karna And Guru Drona will realise that Arjuna whom he clasped to his chest as a diamond was nothing but a cheap glittering piece of flint

I was after all a student, and I needed someone also to teach me by patting me on the back Someone to appreciate my skilful feats. I got no such praise All I got was supreme neglect But sometimes one does see good emerging from evil One positive benefit could not be denied From this indifference I obtained an illustrious guru: I made the Sun-God my preceptor For the last six years I had, every hour of the day time, singlemindedly looked up to him For the last six years he had caressed my back lovingly with his golden fingers. Quietly he had instructed me in all the radiant truths of life. He had filled the hollow of my heart to over-brimming with his divine light.

Gurudeva! What should I offer you as guru-gift if I triumph in this competition? What *can* I offer to a Splendid Effulgence that irradiates every nook and corner of the universe? The only gift that I have worth giving to you is my body, and that I placed in your charge when I became your pupil So what will you ask for your guru-*dakshina*?

Accompanied by Shon, I and Ashvatthaman went to the competition arena in the outskirts of the city The student-warriors were furiously busy decorating the arena The preparations were mostly completed What a magnificent spectacle! It consisted of an enclosure two miles in circumference In the centre were separate grounds for all contests Thirteen in all, and each was glittering with weapons Near the main eastern gate were five grounds for mace, sword, dagger, discus, and javelin Near the west were five for pipe-gun, *bhushundi*, javelin, *pattisha*, and trident Near the southern gate massive tracks for the equestrian event and elephant-combat Near the north an arena for wrestling bouts and hand-to-hand duels, filled with red soil mixed with *takra*-and-sandalwood-oil specially brought from the kingdom of Magadha The excellent enclosure for archery was so constructed that, no matter from which part of the large enclosure one looked, it always appeared to be in the centre A marble platform, twenty arm's-lengths high and twenty long, was erected for the archers—the marble was brought

all the way from the Nishadha kingdom The rust-coloured triangular pennant of the Kauravas fluttered atop the platform, as if challenging the sky Guru Drona would stand on this platform, as judge of the competition, and place a blue-lotus-threaded-on-gold-string garland around the neck of the victor, who would be seated in a canopy on a decorated elephant and taken out in a procession by the citizens The Queen Mother would place a saffron tilak on his forehead and affectionately offer *arati* before him As the finest hero of Hastinapura he would be glorified and respected all over Aryavarta

Around each of the arenas were circular seating arrangements for spectators Near the eastern end were luxurious elevated seats for members of the royal family, in the centre was the spot where Grandsire Bhishma would ensconce himself On his right was Vidura's seat, on his left Maharaja Dhritarashtra's On the left of these seats a grand pavilion had been put up which glittered with colourful curtains, it was reserved for the royal ladies

Leaving their daily chores, the citizens thronged to see the arena, and stood there agape at the spectacle, murmuring among themselves, "Never in the history of the Kuru dynasty have we heard of such a magnificent arena being erected Who is going to be the supreme hero? Bhima, Arjuna, Duryodhana, or Duhshasana?"

We were about to return, because we had arrived after covering a two hundred mile distance from Champanagari, when Ashvatthaman said, 'Karna, all the student-warriors have done something or other to beautify this games arena What have you two done?

"You tell us, what should we do?" Being a youth from the ashram, Ashvatthaman was in charge of organising the diverse activities He was not going to let me off easily

He said this because there was apparently no work left for us to do One of the workers, with a silk cloth tucked under his arm, was about to enter from the main gate Ashvatthaman called out to him "You there! What's that under your arm? Bring it here Let's get these two to do some work "

Ashvatthaman pulled the bundle from the boy, and straightened it, holding the two corners It was the royal insignia of the Kauravas the figure of the Sun God, embroidered with gold thread on expensive silk My eyes glowed with joy Placing the royal insignia in my hands, Ashvatthaman said, "Karna, go and unfurl this on the wooden staff in the central marble platform "

I approached the platform I fixed the insignia to face the east. Shon placed a flower-garland on the glorious insignia.

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And so the appointed Vasanta Purnima day arrived All Hastinapura was a glut of invited guests The day of screening the chaff from the wheat Each competitor, before entering the arena, was expected to obtain the blessings of his guru But but what was I to do? The sky that day was suddenly overcast with dark clouds since dawn I felt deeply frustrated At crack of dawn, at the auspicious hour of Brahma-*muhurta*, I rose and waited, with breath indrawn, for a brief darshan of my celestial guru on the waters of the Ganga But the merciless band of dense wicked clouds stood between him and me The fact was—as I used to tell Shon in our boyhood days—that if I happened to be Garuda, I would have risen high up in the sky in a flash on my strong wings and ripped open the heartless clouds with my sharp-nailed talons Through the rent I could have had a glimpse of at least one hand of my guru And he would have lovingly caressed my back with it But this was not to be There are times when a man is even more helpless than a bird or a beast

Three-fourths of the morning passed, and still no change in the sky Shon stood on the sands of the Ganga, waiting for me I was in the waters He was not to call out to me, even by mistake Even if I remained in the water all day, he would follow suit, on the bank I couldn't stay in the water too long I closed my eyes, helplessly In spite of my efforts, no bright light appeared, as it used to earlier Why? Could it be an ill omen? *Chhee*! The mind gets all crazy at times, thinking of undesirable and evil possibilities As in the past, I folded my palms, and silently prayed "Deva, why are you so angry with me, today of all days? Grant me your blessing today You will see today the citizens honouring me as the supreme hero " I offered him *anjali* and turned There was a strange uneasiness in my heart Shon was waiting for me at the edge He was getting restless to go to the arena But but the moment he saw me, wrinkles creased his forehead I was taken aback I asked him, "What's the matter, Shon? Why the frown?" He kept silent But I couldn't bear his silence I grasped both his shoulders, shook him, and shouted "Shon, *arre*, why are you quiet?" Not saying a word, he gazed at my

ears with wide, rolling eyes The next instant his eyes lost their sparkle I couldn't endure his staring at me in this puzzling manner I cupped his face in my hands and, gazing deeply into his eyes, I asked worriedly, "Shon, are you going to ignore this little request of your brother? Tell me, Shon, what is this life-killing secret that you will hide even from me?"

He was perturbed Clasping, with his trembling hands, my hands on his cheeks, he said, "Bhaiya, don't go to the arena today Your guru hasn't granted you darshan Let's go back "

"You're crazy Does my guru give me darshan every day? Who knows where he goes and hides himself for four whole months in the monsoon?"

"But it isn't monsoon time now We're in spring There's no reason for him not to show his face today "

"I don't know about that I have my guru's blessings today—that's all I know Come " I took his hand and pushed him ahead

"No, bhaiya, I'm not going to let you go " There was fear in his voice

"Why? Don't you know the Hero of Hastinapura is being chosen today? Today of all days I have to be there "

"No, no, not today " He held my hands tightly His grip trembled

"Shon, don't be childish Learn to change with the times Remember, you are Karna's brother " This was the first time ever I had pulled him up so strongly

He eased his face out of my cupping hands, moved four steps back, and said with bowed head, "I am your brother I have never denied this, nor will I ever deny it That is why my mind keeps telling me to tell you not to go to the arena today Because because your flesh-ear-rings have lost their radiance today They're ringed by dark circles "

His piercing words entered my ears like molten glass, and saddened me The countless ants of his doubt nibbled from all sides at my wounded serpent-mind *Why are my flesh ear-rings darkened today? Why is the sky overcast today? What great doom is this an omen of? Which poison-seed is being planted today? What is going to happen to Karna? Why was I given these flesh ear rings? What is their role? Why am I being so stubborn anyway?* Innumerable firefly questions flickered in front of my eyes Finally a voice from within

spoke, and counselled patience I made up my mind that Shon was right, but what harm was there in proceeding towards the arena? Wearily I said to him, "Very well, Shon I won't compete today But on one condition I'll stand outside the arena, near the main gate. I'll enter the arena only when my guru grants me darshan "

Shon, delighted, nodded approval We squelched our way across the sand

All the roads of the capital were silent and deserted Children as well as elders had all gone to the arena Had a stranger entered the city at that time, he would never have believed, even if told, that this was Hastinapura, the capital of the Kauravas, because there wasn't even one person in the city On account of the cloud-covered sky, Hastinapura looked like a coop-imprisoned rooster just before he is sacrificed

We approached the arena, and heard the clapping and shouts of the citizens The noise was enough to send warm blood currents rushing through my body—but to no avail My word to Shon forced me to stand outside the arena We neared the arena entrance The competition had started quite some time ago In some combat or other a competitor had apparently excelled, and continuous acclamation could be heard My feat-eager ambition prowled like a caged tiger, clawing at my flesh-rods on all sides in an attempt to break through It agonised like a tethered calf unable to reach its mother With great effort I controlled myself and said to Shon, "You go in I'll wait here " He stopped dead He probably thought I would sneak in after him Placing my hand on his shoulder, I said, 'Shon, trust me I'm not going in Karna has given his word Go " Gazing at my flesh-ear-rings, he went inside

Emerging from the hive of my mind, countless red bee-thoughts started dancing here and there If my flesh-ear-rings were the root cause of my problem, then why not tear them out and throw them in the dust, and walk into the arena with ripped ears—but this was not possible because no matter how much you wanted to cut your ears it couldn't be done *Why was I given these flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour? What use are they? Why am I being so stubborn anyway?* In the hole of my mind many serpent-thoughts began wriggling I could see nothing of the arena I could hear only the vague conversations of the few spectators near the main entrance, and only in snatches Then suddenly there was a huge uproar My mind rose like milk bubbling to a boil I listened with overpowering curiosity Bits and pieces of words filled my ears

"Duhshasana has been humbled by Bhima! Bhima lifted him as high as his head, slammed him on the ground and sat on his chest He's pummelling him with all his strength "

My shoulder muscles swelled I could hear my heart thumping My swiftly-racing blood said to me *Karna, get up, go in Test your manhood in the competition Today is your chance*

Concentrating all my life-force in my pupils, I gazed up at the sky The thick heartless mass of clouds had not cleared I chafed like a helpless broken-winged bird I paced miserably in circles near the main gate In agony my mind cried out *Surya deva,* one darshan, *please Today is a day when every youth of Hastinapura wants to win even at the cost of his life Be gracious, just this once, cast your hundreds of eyes once on your favourite pupil Just once*

Again the resounding clapping My ears pricked up

"*Wah! Wah!* Nakula is so agile! He's placed a foot each on two horses at the same time and is riding them at the same speed Excellent! May the sons of Pandu be blessed !"

My mind ranswifter than the horses A dust of thoughts rose from my mind's hooves I was still pacing up and down near the entrance For a moment I thought *What promise, what vow?* I wanted to go in that very instant, but a voice kept saying to me *A word's given to be kept, Karna. A person who breaks his word is nothing but an animal* I moved back from the threshold

Still louder acclamation and shrill voices And after that, confused proclamations

'Wah! Wah! Bhima! How easily you've bested unbeaten Duryodhana in the mace duel How tremendous your blows are! It's a feast for the eyes Be blessed, O son of Vayu!"

My mind circled like a mace-fighter Helplessly I knotted my shawl tightly around my wrist Each pore of my body seemed to be boiling I looked at the sky The clouds seemed to be stirring, but nothing more For an instant I wanted to run with all speed to the Ganga and dip my inflamed body in its cool waters I untied the shawl at my wrist, placed it on my shoulder, and made my way to the Ganga

"Wait, bhaiya," Shon called from behind

I looked back and saw him standing at the threshold of the entrance, signalling me to stop I turned My neck was tired from repeated gazing at the sky

An endless flow of clapping, and more clapping Like a horse race Like rain falling in torrents

"Bhaiya, Arjuna has entered the arena."

Arjuna! Arjuna! Arjuna! Why is he so honoured? What great expoloits will he demonstrate?

Word-arrows pierced my ears from all sides Every second the cacophony in the arena grew Announcements came like showers of word-flowers

"Look, there! Arjuna is leaping from horseback to elephant-back and elephant to horseback to show his skill "

"He's brandishing two swords in both hands against the strong adversary facing him In a flash he has flicked the swords far out of his opponent's hands His opponent is shuffling out of the arena with bowed head There is no swordfighter to equal Arjuna "

"Look, there! Arjuna has reached the discus arena How gracefully he twirls the chakra, as if it is a *thali* Off and on he whirls it playfully up in the air, and then receives and balances it on the tip of an arrow "

"He's entering the wrestling arena now! Look at that perfect physique of his—chest as grand as the massive door of the arena Look at his arms and calves, rippling like the wild gourd colocynth! His blue complexion glows so vividly against the red earth of the arena *Arre wah!* And now he has flattened his oppqnent Durmukha on the earth-bed!"

"This Arjuna, how quickly he switches arenas and how adroitly he displays his varied feats—it's impossible to keep track of him Single Arjuna or thirteen Arjunas? There he goes now, dressed in bowman's outfit, to the archery arena, like Vishnu himself Blessed be Arjuna! Blessed be the son of Pandu! Search the whole of Aryavarta and you won't find Arjuna's equal in archery He'll be declared the supreme hero of Hastinapura today "

Acclamation Continuous clapping Clapping that shamed even monsoon downpours in intensity Shouts Noise Confusion Arjuna! Arjuna! Boiling blood! Archer! Overcast sky! Lustreless, dark flesh-ear-rings! Supreme hero! Garland of blue lotuses! Victory procession! Queen Mother !

"Shon, what's happening to me? Let me go to the Ganga, or I'll be burnt to ashes!" Lifting my ear-rings and desperately pressing my palms against my ears, I raised my head and screamed My body was all aflame Wearily I placed my burning head on Shon's shoulder Fiery streams of sweat coursed down my body, which scorched Shon's shoulder Word-sparks had set my flesh on fire Chaos within Despairing hot tears trickled down my cheeks

"Look, there! Arjuna shooting countless arrows at countless targets."

"He's piercing tossed-up fruits in mid-air, and slicing them in twos, fours, eights, and countless fragments No fruit falls to the ground unchopped "

"And there he is, shooting a snake-arrow, that zig-zags across obstacles and drives unerringly to its target "

"Releasing a swarm of arrows in the sky, he creates the illusion of rain With snake-arrows shot at intervals, he creates the effect of lightning "

"Our eyes are blessed today A hero of Arjuna's calibre is not to be found in Hastinapura, not in all Aryavarta "

"This is his last feat He'll pierce the target by sound alone His eyes are bandaged He picks up a sharp arrow, closes his eyes, draws it up to his lips, and remembers his guru He'll never find another guru like Drona in all the three worlds "

"Fortune-favoured Arjuna! Excellent son of Pandu! Before anyone could make out, guided by sound alone, he let fly a sharp shaft straight into the mouth of a dog barking behind his back Blessed be such an excellent archer!"

"Look! Guru Drona has extracted the arrow from the dog's mouth and is displaying it to everyone!"

"Someone has handed him the victory garland of blue lotuses "

Blue-lotus garland! Undefeated archer! Cloud- covered sky! One moment! One moment of fame and honour! What should I do? What should I do?

My mind thrashed about like a fire-ringed bird Would the inflamed pot of my body crack at last under the strain?

My eyes like restless birds pecked incessantly at the shrouding clouds A voice rose from the wounds, "One moment! One moment in the life of Karna! The only moment! ' The clouds were massing and speeding with such furious force! Was there going to be another universal primeval churning in the sky of the ocean? I shook Shon's shoulder vigorously and shouted joyfully, "Shon! Look! The lord of the sky, my guru has come to save me! He is scattering the thick clouds as if they were a herd of goats!"

He embraced me hard, joyfully, and shouted, "Bhaiya! Go! Go in! Your flesh-ear-rings are adazzle again Not just a blue glow like before—they're shining red today!"

"You don't mean it, Shon? My rings shining again!"

"Yes, bhaiya And look—your Gurudeva has scorched away the dark-blue cloud canopy " With deep feeling he lifted both his hands to the sky

I looked up Countless dazzling sun-rays were smiling in the sky. It seemed that my Gurudeva had reined in his thousand-horsed chariot and was showering his blessings on me

Hastinapura, cooped up since dawn like a caged cock, now appeared like a rooster in boisterous cock-crow Tree leaves started shaking The distant Ganga waters gleamed Birds sang in ecstatic abandon In the far distance a cloud could be seen, gracefully sailing away Under its shadow the ancient palace of the Kauravas looked pale and ill

Commotion inside Sky-shattering commotion

"Look! Surya himself has parted the cloud-curtain in order to be present to welcome Arjuna Fortune-favoured Arjuna! Look, Guru Drona is climbing the steps of that magnificent platform With the Sun as witness, he will place the blue-lotus garland on Arjuna's neck Victory to Prince Arjuna!" The whole arena shook with the clamorous victory-shouts

I removed my shawl and flung it around Shon's shoulders Who I was then, I'm not certain I myself could tell Shon's elder brother? Ashvatthaman's friend? Or charioteer's son? *Chhee*! I was none of those I was glowing, molten steel! I was the crackle of lightning! I was a second sun, a second thousand-horsed sun!

I hadn't taken birth to stand like a beggar outside the gates of the arena My entire body was aflame with one desire—to reduce to ashes anyone who dared challenge me A magnificent message, never heard before, entered my ears *Karna, enter Now! This is your moment of truth* I rushed inside I saw the garland uplifted in Guru Drona's hands I raised both my hands and with all the energy I could summon I shouted, "Stop!"

My command pierced the arena like an arrow slicing into the heart of a target Its ferocity was such as to shame even the crash of lightning Thousands of eyes turned towards the arena entrance The garland slipped from Guru Drona's trembling hands to the ground Silence descended on the arena I slapped my palm hard on my left shoulder, the resounding clap reverberated through the entire arena

Waves of heat emanated from my flaming body The citizens moved aside to make way for me Those who did not, were scorched

by my body-heat In no time at all I reached the stone platform, where Acharya Kripa was standing I *pranamed* him formally as one should an elder, and leapt up four steps at a time to the top of the platform Guru Drona was staring at me, surprised This was the first time after six years that I was standing facing him proudly in this way His face was paralysed with displeasure Frowning, he asked, "And who are you?"

Glancing at the sky, *namaskaring* him formally as one should an elder, I replied confidently, "Karna "

Raising my arms and half-circling the assembled citizenry, I shouted, "Citizens of Hastinapura, you who honour justice and manliness! I am Karna, I am ready to perform whatever feats Prince Arjuna has displayed Do I have your permission to do so?"

All stood up Flapping their shawls, they shouted, "Let him show his feats Let Prince Arjuna leave no challenge uncontested "

Maharaja Dhritarashtra heard the shouts and stood up He turned and asked something of Bhishma, who was sitting next to him He raised the royal sceptre, and a hush settled on the arena His voice boomed like a cloud "This arena is the final test of manly skill Any hero of Hastinapura is welcome here Gurudeva, let this brave youth be given a chance "

His decision was greeted by ubiquitous acclaim and approval The arena bubbled with expectation, like milk boiling Standing and clapping spectators sat down Guru Drona, Acharya Kripa and Arjuna descended from the platform and stood on one side

I glanced in the direction of the royal family enclosure, where Vidura, Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Grandsire Bhishma, uncle Shakuni, the minister Vrishavarman and the invited rajas were sitting Near their feet sat all the princes, including Duryodhana, Duhshasana, Durmukha, Dushkara, Vikarna, Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva and Yudhishthira Among the princes I noticed Ashvatthaman also Of them all, only four were smiling Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Prince Duryodhana, Duhshasana, and my friend Ashvatthaman Ashvatthaman raised his hand I accepted silently this token of his affection A thought leapt in my mind at this critical time, *Guru Drona's son is Ashvatthaman But how different are father and son! One is a bubbling fountain of sweet water, the other a cloud-sombre ocean, salty, limitless, but not ready to accept in itself any water from outside*

I looked at the section reserved for the royal ladies But I saw nothing there except one curtain, a shimmering silk curtain

Kneeling, I paid homage to Pitamaha Bhishma, Maharaja Dhritarashtra, and the gleaming curtain

The silence was so total by now that one could hear each other's breathing

This was the moment for which Karna had waited more than six years, day in and day out, till his patience had stretched to breaking point The moment that emerged after six years' baking in the kiln of neglect and indifference! A postscript of a moment after six years of burning suffering! The moment crushed under six years of see-sawing suspicion and trust! The moment that would today make short shrift of all the manly feats shown in the past!

Today were two possibilities only—either Karna would return home with the victory garland of blue lotuses round his neck, or the citizens would return after trampling Karna's lifeless body under-foot The competition could end in no other way Total victory or death Six years of dedicated study under my guru had taught me one simple truth "Win or perish "

I folded my palms and looked up at the sky in anticipation of a blessing Staring fixedly, I greedily gulped the energy of the sun An incredibly powerful shaft of sunlight seemed to penetrate my entire being Karna was no longer Karna He was not a molten steel rod, he was not a flash of lightning, he was not Shon's brother, he was not Ashvatthaman's friend, he was not anybody's son, he was not a participating hero in the Hastinapura contest, nor was he a frustrated student seeking to impress Arjuna and Guru Drona with his brilliant exploits He did not even know where he was Nor was he interested to know, because he was now only a radiant ray of the refulgent Sun-God A flaming, shooting ray! An earth-piercing ray! He did not see any more the thousands of people facing him He did not hear any sound No clapping reached his ears The intense heat of his body no more disconcerted him He was now a beam of light, a beam that was part of an infinite miraculous radiance A beam of light with no independent existence, yet spontaneously contem-plating its being in the three worlds A beam that baffled the universe A beam that sliced the womb of darkness A beam! A pure ray of light!

I leapt down from the platform I did not feel the slightest jerk In no time at all I reached the equestrian arena, where seven white steeds were tethered I stood on the back of one in the middle, and started urging the rest They raised their front hooves high and

neighed loudly No reins could hold them back now They were like seven puppets dancing to my tune I jumped easily from the seven galloping horses on to an elephant, placing my feet on both tusks and standing on them Without even a goad I rode that massive beast as I pleased

Next I entered the discus arena I whirled the massive chakra on my hand as if it were a *thali* Swiftly I swung it skywards As it fell I caught it on my little finger, threw it at my feet, and with my toes twirled it away into the distance

Then the sword arena—where I found two warriors standing, each brandishing two swords I picked up one sword and flourished it expertly, with single blows I slammed the swords away from their grasp They started rubbing their shoulders as if their arms had been wrenched from their bodies Still massaging their shoulders, they left the arena

Next I visited the spear arena Aiming five different spears at one time at five different targets, I ran forward and hurled them Then, rushing back, I released five more spears to pierce the handles of the first five Heaps of spears stuck out from the targets

I entered the wrestling arena, which was in front of the enclosure for the royal ladies There were three competitors waiting They looked to me no greater than three mounds of mud I flung aside my red garment, two of the three mounds of mud saw my skin, yellower than a ripe lemon, and instantly they raised their arms and conceded defeat True, one did challenge me to a duel Duel! It was win or perish! He clenched his teeth and rushed at me, but I pulverised him with a wrestling hold and pressed hard on his neck Thrashing his arms and legs he begged the Maharaja to spare his life The ladies' curtain rippled faintly The King raised his sceptre His life was spared

Finally, I entered the central arena dressed in yellow as an archer My shoulder shawl was blue Slowly I climbed the steps

Arrows whizzed from my bow like sharp quills from a porcupine, and pierced their targets like snakes slithering inside holes

I fixed a snake shaft It veered through obstacles in its path and stung its target

I created the illusion of torrential rain with swarms of arrows Shooting golden snake arrows in their dark midst, I created the effect of lightning

I sliced fruit flung in the sky, scattering the earth with countless flesh fragments The fruit was a solid mass thrown up, but the slices were powdery when they fell

Then—my ultimate feat Target pierced by sound-aim! Shoot by sound and hit the target A stupendous task Everywhere total silence First my eyes were bandaged I took a sharp arrow and touched it to my lips At that moment I did not want even to remember my guru, the reason being that I did not know who I was Who is the guru of a shaft of light and how is a shaft of light blessed?

The dog was tied behind me A worker stood by to prod the dog with lance point and make it bark I was making no distinction between the prodder, the dog, and the lance All that mattered was the target pierced-by-sound! I focused my mind on the sound waves that would emanate from the mouth and strike the chords of my ear.

The pores in my body became all ears I cautioned myself My ear-like eyes sought the source of the sound Going by the very first sound vibration, I had to pierce the target Silence all round like the silence in a cremation ground Everyone watching with bated breath Such soundlessness, such absolute calm that you could hear the next person s hearbeat A sweet sound struck my ears Hardly had the arrow sped from the bow than I heard the dog's barking Everything happened in a flash The arrow left the bow, I worriedly removed the blindfold and looked at the dog, still barking The arrow hadn't hit the dog's mouth I had missed my target My life had lost its purpose

A core of energy had deserted my being—and gone who knows where I felt grievously tired and very depressed Shouts on all sides ' Victory to Prince Arjuna! Glory to Guru Drona!" Stinging shouts from hundreds of thousands of throats

How could this have happened? How could I have missed the sound-target? What was that sweet sound that struck my ears? Did the dog change his barking tone? And where did my arrow hit? In the cloud sky of my mind, these lightning queries flashed I felt the platform slipping from under my feet Where was I? On this earth? In heaven? Or in hell? And these applauders of Prince Arjuna—were they spirits in hell? The entire arena seemed to whirl around me I sat down instantly, and placed my head between my knees The blue lotus garland lay beneath my feet The glory garland! I picked it up with the intention of tearing it and scattering the pieces everywhere By this time Guru Drona and Arjuna had reached the

platform I did the best I could to stand up Guru Drona took the garland from my hands Bhima, Yudhishthira and others, exulting, ran to the platform to felicitate Arjuna

Karna had become a beggar in a kingdom of warriors the scum of the realm of valour, simply because he couldn t hit the sound target He did not have the unerring arrow that would make the whole world shudder He alone gets respected who has that arrow The world values valour washes the feet of Valour If you wish to live with honour then—then you will have to pierce the sound target Learn that skill no matter where it is to be had Then only will honour follow, otherwise you ll be cast aside, isolated Had I jumped from the balcony face first on the ground below, my unfeeling head would not have burst My helpless mind moaned What now, what now? Repeatedly I thought of leaping down head first and performing the cremation rite of cracking the corpse's skull But truth is cruel There are times when it refuses to let a man die easily I was born with impenetrable flesh-armour Who will give shelter to Karna in this land of crazy people? Only his brother Shon My eyes circled the arena for a glimpse of Shon He was standing at the main gate, wiping his eyes with his shawl His heart was breaking to witness his brother's fatal, bitter defeat He needed consolation Slowly I descended the stairs of the platform

Guru Drona lifted his arm to place the blue lotus garland round Arjuna's neck No end to the universal applause 'Victory to Prince Arjuna! Glory to Guru Drona!" In the meantime, Grandsire Bhishma took the sceptre from Maharaja Dhritarashtra, lifted it skywards, and in a trembling voice shouted 'Wait!" But no one heard him clearly in that chaos of oceanic noise Guru Drona placed the garland on Arjuna's neck Claps resounded fiercely One by one the spectators came down the platform I was so dazed that I couldn't make out if I was alive or dead

Grandsire Bhishma was trembling incontrollably The golden sceptre of the Kauravas shook in his hand Waving the uplifted sceptre he tried to attract the attention of the crowd Prince Arjuna noticed this, and quickly raised his hand to signal the people to wait Instantly the arena fell silent Pitamaha Bhishma's quavering yet sharp voice pierced the heart of the silence "Guru Drona! Citizens of Hastinapura! I, Bhishma, son of Ganga, eldest of the Kauravas, tell you this Arjuna is not the supreme archer today "

Hearts atremble again A web of great confusion on the arena. The citizens whispered to each other Someone shouted, "Pitamaha, tell us then, who's the best archer?"

"Karna " The Grandsire's cloud-booming voice entered everyone's ears like an arrow

I and Shon were about to emerge out of the main gate when, hearing the voice, we turned back

"How's that?" Guru Drona asked quickly

' Guru Drona, your fondness for Arjuna has made you blind Not just blind, but deaf too Excess fondness is a defect "

"Tell us, Pitamaha, what happened?" came voices from all sides

"Only four men in this arena know how to shoot at the sound-target Karna, then Drona, Arjuna, and me " Bhishma said this with uplifted arm

The spectators were by now all gazing at Bhishma alone That gentle Kuru exemplar of Truth lashed at the spectators with his sharp tongue The white locks of his beard trembled as he spoke

' Of these four, Karna was, like Arjuna, a contestant Because his eyes were blindfolded, he was unable to see the arrow he fired That leaves me, Arjuna, and Drona But Arjuna and Drona focused their attention on the barking dog They heard nothing else But I can assure you that prior to the bark of the dog I heard a sweet sound Heroic Karna pierced that sound accurately That is why that jewel precious garland should hang round Karna's neck today "

'What kind of sound, Pitamaha?" Questions poured in from all sides "*What sound? What sound?*"

I recalled the time when I had first met him on the bank of the Ganga He had said then, "You are the only person I know who arrived at the Ganga's bank before I did " I was deeply moved I thought *Pitamaha, in the whole of Hastinapura you are the first humble and truth speaking person I have met Blessed is such dedication to truth*

Modulating his voice he said in a grave tone "Before the dog barked, a bird on the *tamal* tree opposite chirped after feeding her chick Karna fired as soon as he heard that chirp and hit her with unerring aim She s still there on the tree, with the sharp arrow in her mouth I can see her clearly from here The piercing of this target is superior to the piercing done by Arjuna Karna is the supreme hero today " He pointed a finger in the direction of the *tamal* Thousands of eyes followed his finger

A curious fowler ran towards the tree With great skill he brought back that bird, still frightened by the noise and confusion, and placed her in the hands of the Grandsire, who removed my sharp arrow embedded in the bird's beak She chirped sweetly again As soon as I heard her, the entire incident rushed back to me He released the bird into the sky Chirruping and fluttering, she flew back to her nest Reverberation of claps everywhere An ecstatic Shon embraced me at the main gate Acclamation on all four sides "Victory to brave Karna!" "Victory to Pitamaha Bhishma!" The entire arena seemed to be dancing like the waves of the Ganga Somewhere, a kokila trilled his melody on the branches of an *ashoka* In my mind was a weird medley of contradictory feelings Sometimes I was filled with respect for Grandsire Bhishma, and then suddenly I felt myself burning at the thought of Guru Drona placing the garland on Arjuna's neck Sometimes I overflowed with love for my loving brother who used to wipe the tears from my eyes, and the next moment I was all shaking with anger at Arjuna who dared to accept the victory garland Is the mind a colour-changing chameleon? God alone knows When such conflicting emotions affect a person, only one takes predominance—and that is anger Anger Anger's like fire It flames up when fanned by the wind of anything contrary All tender feelings are burnt to ashes in that massive conflagration And when this huge fire blazes up, it's very difficult to extinguish My lips trembled in anger, my flesh-ear-rings flamed red If I was indeed the supreme hero, then what business was it of Arjuna to sport that blue lotus victory garland? What is the point of having a truth-speaking, unbiased judge like Pitamaha Bhishma in a place like this?

My ears were assailed by words from all sides "We are fortunate today You will not find an archer of Karna's eminence in the whole of Aryavarta But, poor man, he never received his due "

How two-faced society can be! Always ready to trump up this person now, and some useless person another time!

"Our eyes have been blessed today Never have we seen, never have we heard of such target-skill! But the victory garland belongs to Karna's neck "

Their shallow sympathy was like ghee fuelling the fire of my anger

My blood, rushing through my veins, seemed to be shouting at me "You haven't been born, Karna, to bask in the indulgent

sympathy of the world Stand up, and complete your undoubted victory "

I threw my shawl towards Shon and mixed with the crowd surging towards the platform The moment I climbed the platform, they began waving their shawls wildly The arena had become a festival ground Justice and injustice, truth and untruth—no one seemed to care what all this meant As soon as I lifted my hand as a signal to them to wait, the multitude, out of affection, squatted on the ground Thousands of ears pricked up to listen to my words I raised my hands and proclaimed in a loud voice, "The blue lotus victory garland has not adorned my neck today My victory therefore is incomplete If anyone feels that it needs to be done, I am ready to issue another challenge to Arjuna to meet me in duel on this platform Only a duel can decide who is superior "

I was not looking for alms from anyone

The people rose to their feet, and began exclaiming, "Good! Good!"

What was Dhritarashtra going to decide?—this was uppermost in their minds A calm fell on the place By this time Acharya Kripa had risen from his seat and hurriedly ascended the platform He glanced at me with bitter scorn After paying homage to the Maharaja, he said, "I am Acharya Kripa, Gurudeva of Karna's class It is true, Maharaja, that Karna is my disciple But I have no information about his family Nor has he breathed a word about his lineage to anyone Prince Arjuna is born in a Kshatriya family According to the rules of war-craft and dharma, only those of the same caste are allowed to duel First, Karna must reveal his brilliant background to this assembly of Hastinapura citizens Then only will Arjuna decide if and when to duel with him, because the end result of a duel is always victory or death "

His words punctured me with the sharpness of spear-points What family background could I name, standing on that platform where heroic skill was tested? Did I have the courage to inform all these illustrious descendants of the solar dynasty that I was the son of a charioteer? For a moment I was lost in a welter of thoughts Lowering my head, I pondered Two powerful possibilities vied for supremacy One shouted "Tell them, Karna, tell them with pride, 'I am Adhiratha and Radha's son, the charioteer's son Karna I am Shon's brother, Karna I am Karna the charioteer ' The other said 'There are only narrow-minded people here How will they ever

accept the fact of your caste?' They will sneer and say, 'What? Charioteer's son? So why is he here? Pack him off to the stables '"

My mind plant vacillated in the windy buffets of my indecision My neck wilted, like a lotus under the onslaught of rain Someone was climbing the platform Wearily I raised my head and looked It was Prince Duryodhana The same imposing gait The same sharp, pointed nose The same piercing eyes He approached and in words that struck like a whiplash, with fists clenched, rolling his keen eyes and pacing around the platform, he said, "Gurudeva Acharya Kripa is making a cruel mockery of the contest Kshatriya! How is Karna in any way less than a Kshatriya? How do the books of dharma define a Kshatriya? He who has powerful arms— he who rules his own kingdom—and he who is born in a royal family Karna has made it abundantly clear, by the force of his manly skill, that he is a Kshatriya If this is not sufficient to convince anyone, I—Duryodhana—will prove that he is indeed a Kshatriya and that the duel should take place I, Prince Duryodhana, hereby proclaim that, from this instant, on this platform, in everyone's presence, brave, illustrious and valiant Karna is, by my authority, declared Raja of Anga From this very moment the land of Anga, adjacent to Magadha, which was till now in the possession of the Kauravas, belongs to Karna Karna is now the Raja of Anga '

He turned his strong neck and took everyone's permission Not a murmur from any side He curved his thick eyebrows even further and clapped his hands to summon an attendant In an instant the platform was crowded with attendants He gave them the proper instructions "Fetch the throne " "Get the lustral water ' Call the *purohita* "

In no time at all a golden throne had been placed on the platform, followed by the anointing water and the royal vestments, on which lay a gold crown and a silver sword Two elderly Brahmins trailed behind Flowers were distributed to everyone present The fragrance of sandalwood and musk oil spread ubiquitously Kettle-drums and *dundhubi* drums sounded The arena was transformed into an area for the performance of an auspicious ceremony It was impossible to guess what was going on

Whispers everywhere "We've never heard of a coronation like this in the city of Hastinapura from the days of Maharaja Manu till the times of Maharaja Dhritarashtra "

"Good! That brave man is finally getting what he richly deserves "

"But what next—what after the coronation is over? What will be the outcome of the duel?"

After the preparations had been made, Raja Duryodhana took me by my arm and seated me on the throne. The elderly Brahmins began melodiously intoning the sacred mantras Where a little while ago had been clapping, shouts and heated discussion, there was now the echoing of mantras My head was sprinkled with sanctifying water from different rivers of Aryavarta—the Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati, Sindhu, Gomati, and many others On the one hand, my head was drenched with these waters, on the other, my mind was drenched with the pure Ganga of affection that Prince Duryodhana had showered on me How immediately helpful he was, how generous! Suppose he hadn't come to my aid today, what then? The very thought unnerved me Karna had loved only a few, very carefully chosen individuals his parents and his brother, then Ashvatthaman, next Pitamaha Bhishma, and now Prince Duryodhana But Prince Duryodhana's case was very different from the others, because he had elevated, with his own hands, me, a person fallen to the depths of shame He had in the twinkling of an eye metamorphosed a non-entity into a raja And Karna would reserve for ever and ever a special corner of his heart for Prince Duryodhana Sitting on the throne, I made up my mind that this was going to be so

He placed the golden crown on my golden locks, and draped the royal vestments round my shoulders Lifting the silver sword high above his head and waving it, he proclaimed "Karna, Raja of Anga—' And the others chorused "Victory to him!"

My mind was filled with grateful respect for Duryodhana for showing such reckless courage An indescribable joy gleamed in his lotus eyes I wanted to embrace him tightly The citizens were loudly acclaiming the title bestowed on Karna, "the Raja of Anga " A charioteer's son had become an emperor! Something that neither Guru Drona nor Acharya Kripa could do in six years, something that very likely they could not have done in a whole lifetime, had been achieved in a flash today by Duryodhana Mace hero Duryodhana Prince Duryodhana Injustice-battling Duryodhana Recogniser-of-valour Duryodhana *Chhee!* My *friend* Duryodhana My dear-as-life companion Duryodhana Two tears of intense gratefulness welled up in my eyes—as if they were telling Duryodhana, 'Prince Duryodhana, you have today set a dust-

trodden lotus in a crown You have picked up a jewel lying in the dust and embraced it You have stood by me in insult My life now is all yours, only yours "

The citizens rained flower on me from all sides My heart brimmed over with their love Even if I took part in the duel now, what did it matter? Where else would I get the opportunity to meet a noble death? A death for a hero who has received a flowery ovation A death sitting on a throne? So, for Prince Duryodhana's sake I *will* fight the duel today with all my life I *will* settle my six-year-old score My day-and-night duel training *will* find its acid test today The strength of my arms *will* be decided today Arjuna *will* be rendered lifeless today

I was in need of another blessing too my mother's If only she had been present in the arena today! I am sure she would have run to me and embraced me to her bosom She would have repeatedly kissed my head and my flesh-ear-rings in everyone's presence—exactly as she kissed me when I was young Is there any mother who can restrain her joy when she sees her son crowned emperor? But she was absent today Only father happened to be in Hastinapura—but where he was in the midst of all this teeming crowd, I had no idea

My eyes surveyed the arena In the far distance, near the main entrance, stood father How tired he looked Within six years all his hair had turned white His back was bent His neck trembled with the effect of old age He stood there, supported by the stick in his hand, with great difficulty What must he be feeling hearing the applause for his son? How anxious he must be to go near his son! But who was there to assist him to me?

I glanced at Shon I think he immediately guessed the message in my eyes Swiftly he descended the stairs and disappeared in the crowd Pushing his way through with both hands, he reached father Holding father by one hand, and with the other pushing people aside, he made his way in my direction I rose The people thought I was going to announce my participation in the duel But my mind was eager to meet father I needed his blessing

In no time at all Shon brought father to the platform

Seeing the golden crown I was wearing, his neck began trembling even more His stick wobbled His eyes filled I bent and touched his feet with my crowned head Two tears fell from his eyes on my head I was blessed Two tear drops of love fell on a head that had

already been purified with the lustral waters of the Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati and other rivers Now truly had the anointing of the raja of Anga been fulfilled What purer water could there be than these two tear drops?

My throat choked at the memory of all the countless hardships that he had suffered on my account

He raised me up and said in a quavering voice, "Karna!"

I replied in the same emotional tone, "Pita-ji!"

He enfolded me in his embrace His stick slipped from his hand and fell The arena witnessed our embrace in breathless silence. For a moment no one seemed to know what was actually happening on the platform All were waiting patiently to witness the duel

Acharya Kripa saw me call out "Pita-ji!" and touch my father's feet Immediately he came forward, raised his hand, and shouted "Karna is a charioteer's son The question of a duel between him and Prince Arjuna does not arise Karna is the son of the Maharaja's charioteer, Adhiratha "

Hearing this, the massive-bodied Bhima lumbered up from among the group of princes where he was sitting Twirling his fingers contemptuously at me, he said, "What's that you said? Charioteer's son? What's he doing among these warriors then? Tell him to do his family business and go brandish a whip Leave this place! Massage the horses in the stables and collect their dung! What gives him the right to climb the illustrious platform of the Kaurava dynasty? What audacity!"

All the princes burst out in censorious laughter The noise increased everywhere They began whispering to each other "Charioteer's son! Charioteer's son!" I anguished, I wanted to cry—sitting on the throne

Those words, growing louder in volume each time, entered my ears like flaming arrow-heads, "Charioteer's son! Charioteer's son!"

Ten, twenty, hundred, thousands of voice-arrows whizzed through the air "Charioteer's son! Charioteer's son!"

Had Hastinapura lost the ability today to discriminate between truth and untruth? Had the flame of knowing justice from injustice flickered out in Hastinapura today? Was there no one in Hastinapura with courage enough to hear the broken-hearted cry of Karna? No one with courage enough to see the suffering mind of Karna? The Hastinapura of Maharaja Manu, the Hastinapura of famed

Nahusha, the Hastinapura of all-conquering Yayati, the Hastinapura of Shantanu, Dushyanta and Bharata—the Hastinapura of those gurus whose memory is still green in the minds of its citizens, the gurus who had only recently departed to the land of the hereafter—why was that Hastinapura so cold and lacklustre today? Why did that Hastinapura lack confidence to battle boldly with injustice today? The injustice done to Karna—the insult shown to a warrior on the rostrum for heroes Today truth was being butchered on the altar of lies in the sacrificial ceremony of pride, and the followers of dharma—Vidura, Dhritarashtra, and Pitamaha Bhishma—were tolerating it with bowed heads When will they speak up? What will they say? Why are they silent? Putting aside all my respectful feelings for them for a moment, I felt constrained to ask them if they were born merely to wear a golden crown and sit on a high seat? Were you born merely to ride in chariots pulled by swift and proud horses on the roads of Hastinapura? Why were you silent today? Why don't you dare use your voices to protest this injustice to Karna? If subjects cannot turn with hope to their monarch, who can they turn to? With full expectation I kept gazing at the members of the royal family. Not a word from them Voices from all sides "Charioteer's son! Charioteer's son!" With clenched fists the people were shouting violently in the direction of the south-west: "Charioteer's son! Massager of horses!"

What a mad world it is! A minutes ago it had set Karna on the pinnacle of glory, hymned his praises so loudly—and now it had already started denigrating him My head whirled I wanted to fling my crown in the dust of Hastinapura Stuffing my ear-ring lobes in my ears and pressing my ears with my palms, I helplessly raised my head My Gurudeva was standing in the sky My buffeted mind, grasping his countless ray-like fingers and shaking them vigorously and clinging to them, said, "Gurudeva, you are burning up there. In spite of your presence, I have been grievously insulted today. Why was I made a charioteer? Is it my fault I am a charioteer? Has anyone ever been able to choose his or her birth? The citizens of Hastinapura today are belittling a student in front of his guru What shall I do? They're hurting me, hitting me from all sides Where can I hide?" I covered my face with both hands in shame, in an agony of near-death. I wanted the platform to crack open and the earth-womb to swallow me up

A tumult somewhere made me raise my head. All the attendants were rushing to the royal ladies' enclosure. One ran up to the platform. Panting, he whispered to blue-skinned Arjuna wearing the blue-lotus garland, "Prince, the Queen Mother Kunti Devi has fainted " Arjuna flung away his garland and ran down the platform to the enclosure. The spectators were shouting all this while: "Charioteer's son!"

Intending to fling aside my crown and leave, accompanied by father, I touched the crown. I felt someone patting my back. It was Duryodhana Stroking my back with his left hand, and lifting his right hand in a clenched fist, he said, "Be careful. Karna is the raja of Anga Duryodhana's friend I will grind underfoot any haughty heads that make fun of him as a charioteer Karna is no longer Karna, he is Karna, the king of Anga He is Prince Duryodhana's friend " His lotus eyes emitted fire In a high-pitched voice he said again, "This arena is reserved for the illustrious heroes of the Kaurava dynasty No insult to any warrior will be tolerated here. Today's events are over The citizens can go home " Without glancing in the direction of Guru Drona, he concluded the day's programme

The citizens rose, preparing to leave The blue-lotus garland was crushed under their feet The garland of invincibility—trodden into dust!

Overwhelmed with emotion, I embraced Duryodhana From today Karna was Prince Duryodhana's friend His strength, body, mind, weapons-knowledge—all were at the service of Prince Duryodhana Taking his hand in mine and pressing it warmly, I said, "King I, Karna, Raja of Anga, give you my word today—to you only—that I will faithfully be with you all my life with the same determined Meru-like strength with which you have helped me today I will give up my life, but I will not swerve from my loyalty "

He stared for a moment at my flesh-ear-rings. The citizens had all left The arena was empty I, Shon, Duryodhana and father descended the platform Hoping to make my final *namaskara* to the setting sun, I gazed westwards A black cloud had shrouded the sun In the fading darkness the small contesting arenas in the amphitheatre assumed weird shapes The horses in the equestrian arena circled aimlessly The garland which Shon had placed on the royal Kaurava crest was still there, but all withered The Kaurava pennant was not fluttering though, it was still

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I couldn't sleep that night, as on other days. The incidents from the morning kept dancing before my eyes. What an upheaval had taken place in a single day! That I was a charioteer—why did that fact have to be so painful to me today? After all, what is Kala, lord of Time? Isn't he a charioteer too? He whips the human horses to such incredible speeds! I would never have believed an astrologer who predicted the events of today. But the events did take place. First, the people applauded heroic Karna, and then insulted him as the charioteer's son. Whom others called charioteer, Duryodhana called friend. Duryodhana! Extraordinarily courageous! Why was he the only one to think of taking revenge for the insult that I had received? Because he loved me, or because he hated Arjuna? Or was it because he was angry with Bhima? A white ant of doubt crawled out of the fissure of my mind. I tossed all night in bed, restless. Sleep simply would not come. Sleep curveted like a nervous calf frightened by a loud noise. No matter how often I called, she refused to enter the cowpen of my eyes.

I came out from my room in the military academy. The full moon was showering the earth with silvery radiance from her pot. The distant star Arundhati watched, with bitter, blinking eyes, the generosity lavished by the moon on the earth. My mind was cleared of the clouds of doubt. The cool waves of the Ganga caressed my shoulders and seemed to say: Come, see how my countless daughters are dancing in silver dresses.

I wrapped the shawl around myself and came out of the academy. Right behind the academy flowed the Ganga. Occasionally I heard a red sheldrake flapping its wings on the branch of an *ashoka*. I reached the tranquil bank of the Ganga. What a spectacular witness! How many generations of the Kaurava dynasty had she observed! How many remarkable changes had she calmly reflected in her waters! I sat on a black stone ledge and gazed at her silvery lovely form. I heard a gurgling sound at a distance. A human shape bent over the Ganga's waters. Who had come at night to fetch water? I shouted, "Who's there?"

The form, carrying a water pot on its shoulder, slowly approached me. My curiosity deepened. A burly, tall individual stood in front of me. The pot on his shoulder made him lean his head to one side. He was steadying the pot with both hands. As soon as he came near me, he said, "I am Satyasena."

"Satyasena!" I began rooting through the fabric of memory A stray thread was in my grasp, but I couldn't be certain of what and where It seemed to me that I had certainly heard the name of Satyasena somewhere I asked again, "Satyasena who?"

'Satyasena, the charioteer from Prayag "

Prayag! The confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna! My curiosity grew I asked once more, "At this time of night, in Hastinapura, on the bank of the Ganga—Why?"

"I had heard of the fame of the Kaurava Maharaja Dhritarashtra. I came here in the hope that my chariot-skill will be appreciated in Hastinapura My sister Vrishali and my mother have come with me "

"Vrishali!" The word came out of my lips with graceful ease.

"Yes We had hoped to be here during daylight But one of our horses sprained his leg in the thick forest of Kampilya, and we were forced to slow down We have just arrived here "

"Has the hospitality of Hastinapura so fallen that you have been reduced to fetching water at this time of night?"

' No, that's not so We are not staying with anyone I don't know anyone here I have left mother and sister in the precincts of the Vishnu Mandir The travel had made mother very thirsty, and so I came here for water But, sir, who are you?"

"I m no Sir, I'm Karna," I removed his misconception

"Karna? You mean uncle Adhiratha of Champanagari " He said this staring at my flesh-ear-rings

"Yes, I'm his son "

He kept repeatedly looking at my flesh-ear-rings, though he had difficulty doing so because of the pot on his shoulder I said, "You can go If you can make it, meet me tomorrow at the military academy "

Steadying the pot, he left, the sand squelching under his feet Gusts of cool breeze brushed against me To prevent the shawl from slipping, I flung one end of it over my right shoulder and across my back I felt something strike against my back What could it be? I pulled back the shawl end and examined it Something tied in a knot Eagerly I opened it A shard of a broken pot I had hurriedly draped an old shawl when leaving my room For an instant I felt like throwing the shard away—but I checked myself Playing with it, I walked back home, the sand squelching under my feet

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The next day I kept a look-out for Satyasena. He did not turn up. Why he did not come, and also to find out if all was well with him, I dspatched Shon to the Vishnu Temple.

The story he told me on returning was heart-touching. A little after Satyasena returned from the Ganga, his old mother, as a consequence of the travail of travel, started vomiting blood. She passed away in the sacred precincts of the Vishnu Mandir, leaving her two children to the care of Lord Vishnu.

Satyasena was definitely in need of help. I sent Shon again with the instruction that he bring Satyasena with him this time. All alone in the massive city of Hastinapura! It was just a coincidence that we two met last night on the bank of the Ganga. It's coincidences anyway that dictate what a man has to do in life. And man gets the credit for doing what he does.